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THE IMPULSE TO PRESERVE: A THEORY OF HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Debora de Moraes Rodrigues

A THESIS

in

Historic Preservation

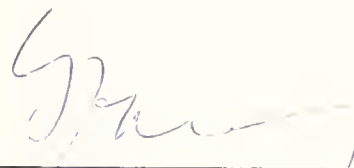
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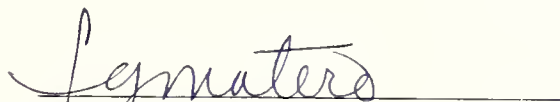
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Dedicated to the memory of my mother, Eva Maria de Moraes Rodrigues.

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INTRODUCTION

A Theory of Historic Preservation

All historic preservation is vexed by a simple philosophical point. If beauty is entirely in the eye of the beholder, if historic importance is merely a creature of historical interest, if the past is wholly a projection of present anxieties, then everything and nothing deserves to be preserved—for everything and nothing is equally valuable, everything and nothing is equally significant, everything and nothing is equally rare.

We lack, of course, the conservative capital to preserve the past entire, just as we lack the revolutionary resolve to destroy the past entire. And so we lurch undecided from historic preservation to historic preservation, preserving the ephemera of 1960s rock music with the same energy that we preserve the National Gallery's Renaissance paintings, allowing tourist traps to disfigure Gettysburg's battlefield with the same abandon that we allow new brick walkways to beautify Baltimore's harbor. Historic preservation is something that we do without being entirely sure why we do it: a practice without coherent theory or accepted justification, and consequently a practice doomed to some absurdities.

Part of the problem is this: the demand that historic buildings and sites be preserved is, by definition, socially subversive of the present, for it wrests some of the traditional rights of property away from the authority of ownership and capital. A good neo-Marxist could embrace that fact and use it to build the coherent theory of historic preser-

vation that we currently lack: all the judgments of beauty and historic importance that people think they are making when they demand historic preservation are in fact nothing more than unconscious expressions of the power relations of class, race, and gender—but historic preservation can in certain cases still be a good thing to do because it helps to move property from private to public control, and it has a revolutionary effect in raising class-consciousness and unsettling the vested interests of the rich, white male owners.

And another part of the problem is this: the demand that historic buildings and sites be preserved is, by definition, intellectually subversive of the present, for it seeks to wrest authority away from autonomous selves—belittling present purposes in the name of the superior authority of the creative impulses of the past. A good postmodernist could embrace that fact and use it to build the coherent theory of historic preservation that we currently lack: our belief in transcendental judgments of beauty and historic importance have not survived the collapse of our belief in the transcendental rationality that guaranteed them—but historic preservation can in certain cases still be a good thing to do because of its playful effect of light-minded aestheticism, and its help in breaking down the distinctly modern notion of ordered progress in history.

But though they may be able to build coherent theories to guide preservation—which is to say, provide an internally consistent rationale for preservation—both Marxism and postmodernism fail to provide a *convincing* rationale, for neither seems capable of accounting for the fact that, before the emergence of any theory, human beings seem to have a genuine impulse to preserve. Research in the history of ideas could report the ebb and flow of this impulse, and sociological investigation could report its present extent. But the

truth behind the impulse to preserve—and consequently a genuine theory of historic preservation—cannot emerge from either the history of ideas or sociology. It must emerge, rather, from a philosophical examination of beauty, history, and rarity as these notions appear in the practice of historic preservation.

The contemporary impulse to preserve is often naïve and unreflective in its application—and occasionally ludicrous. But, as I hope to show in the course of this thesis, it also represents an accurate though inchoate moral insight into the need to have meaning and beauty around us for the Good Life. What we demand, the case studies examined in this thesis will reveal, is a theory that defends the possibility of common sense in historic preservation. Places are worthy of preservation when they manifest beauty, rarity, historical association, and simple antiquity. The worthiness, however, is finally moral: the extent to which places contribute to life well-lived.

In Chapter One of this thesis, some of the pressing theoretical problems are raised, with particular reference to six brief examples of problematic preservations: the Van Rensselaer Mansion in Philadelphia, the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, New York's Penn Station, the Chicago Stock Exchange Building, the Gropius House in Massachusetts, and the Marin County Civic Center.

In Chapter Two, early attempts to formulate a theory—from the nineteenth-century Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc to John Ruskin, and on to the Modernist architects and theoreticians—are analyzed both for their failures as theory and their historical importance.

In Chapter Three, the analysis of attempts at theory continues into the late twentieth century, with particular attention paid to the work of David Lowenthal, Manfredo Tafuri, and Christine Boyer.

In Chapter Four, the details of a real-life, complicated, and not entirely resolvable middle-ground preservation project—the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle at Yale University—are presented as a case study upon which to test a theory of preservation.

And finally, in Chapter Five, there is posed, if not a complete theory, at least the prolegomena to a theory, searching in the conservative tradition of Edmund Burke for hints to how we may construct a commonsensical, middle-ground theory that would allow us to distinguish good from bad preservation.

Problems and Absurdities in Preservation Practice

A complete dedication to the past, like a complete dedication to the future, might leave us with considerable practical problems, but it would certainly solve all the current theoretical problems of historic preservation.

The truth, however, is that we do not have now—and never will have—the resources necessary for such extreme positions: we lack the conservative capital to preserve everything, just as we lack the revolutionary resolve to destroy everything and start anew. The past, said Karl Marx, “weighs like an alp upon the brain of the living.”¹ And thus, from time to time, we invest energy and money and expertise in saving things that we probably shouldn’t bother to—as, to take a whimsical example, a house shaped like a work boot carefully preserved by a retired key-punch operator and grandmother of two.

The house, located outside York, Pennsylvania, was built in 1948 as a promotion gimmick by Mahlon N. Haines—a flamboyant retailer known as “the Shoe Wizard of York.” Upon learning that outsiders planned to buy and relocate the shoe, Ruth Miller—who lived nearby—quickly purchased it, stating, “[t]hat house belongs here.”² Preserving

¹ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (New York: Intern. 1898), 5.

² Ruth Miller, quoted in “Who’s News,” *Historic Preservation* 47 (November / December 1995): 21.

“uniqueness”—and this house is certainly unique in any sense of the word—poses a particular problem: the fact that a building uniquely represents a form of architecture does not make it worth preserving if the form of architecture it represents is bad.



Fig. 1. A shoe-shaped house preserved by a retired key-punch operator and grandmother of two.

But just as there is unnecessary preservation—a falling too far into the extreme of trying to preserve everything old—so there is unnecessary destruction—a falling too far into the extreme of trying to destroy everything old. A proposal to clear the Parthenon and the other old bits of stone from the Acropolis in Athens, a willingness to build condominiums on the site of Mont-Saint-Michel, a desire to construct a convention center at the Taj Mahal are all too absurd to be contemplated. But scarcely less vandalous things have been done in the name of clearing the past for the future.

The desecration of the holy places of England during the Reformation—Cromwell's roundheads using cathedrals for target practice—is responsible for many of the Gothic ruins that the Victorians would later so much admire. The nose of the Sphinx in Egypt was knocked off by cannon-fire. The ruins of ancient Rome were plundered for stone.

The destruction of, for example, historic Warsaw by the Nazis may be a special case—an unintended consequence of the barbarity of modern total war. But during the twentieth century, the Communist regimes in particular have often operated on the deliberate desire to destroy the past. The outright destruction of and confident refusal of maintenance of churches behind the Iron Curtain has resulted in huge losses. And in Cambodia, the Khymer Rouge, declaring their accession to power, Year Zero on the new order, carried the systematic extreme of destroying everything old—buildings, artifacts, and people alike—as far as it has ever been carried. Even though it ultimately fails in its project to start over, totalitarianism—Fascist and Marxist alike—has proved willing to attempt destruction unenvisioned before the twentieth century.

Preservations, however, rarely have to deal with such extremes, and when they do, there are far more important moral stands to take than preservationism. But that fact does not necessarily save them from all failure. As preservation lurches from smaller project to project, we can find less extreme but nonetheless real examples of preservations that have unnecessarily siphoned off resources to save the unworthy and examples of destruction that have unnecessarily cleared the ground of the worthy.

At the extremes, common sense and theory are in conflict: we can hold an extreme theory of systematic destruction or preservation only in the absence of common sense. But that fact is not sufficient to mean that all theory is unnecessary. When we look at the middle ground between the metaphysical extremes, we find that our current lack of a coherent theory of preservation—a commonsensical, middle-ground theory, as it were—leads architectural practice into real failures.

The next two chapters of this thesis turn to the failure of theorists—from Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc to Christine Boyer—to provide a workable middle-ground theory of preservation. But it may be helpful first to take up quickly some particular examples of middle-ground failures in preservation: the Van Rensselaer Mansion in Philadelphia, the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco, New York's Penn Station, the Chicago Stock Exchange Building, the Gropius House in Massachusetts, and the Marin County Civic Center. The aim is to seek in them the failings that point us to the necessity for determining why we need a more widely understood theoretical approach that can be used as a general tool for each particular case.

The Van Rensselaer Mansion

There is a claim, made by many postmodern thinkers, that we are living at the end of time—that there are no originals left for us—that the effect of making copies of real things is at last to reduce the real things themselves to copies. On its face, the claim seems to mean the end of meaningful human endeavor, of a purpose for human thought, of a reason to do anything. But if there were ever an example that seems to prove the

postmodern claim true, it would be the degradation of the Van Rensselaer Mansion on Rittenhouse Square.

In the late nineteenth century, as expressions of their wealth and power, the elite of Philadelphia built large houses in the city, particularly around Rittenhouse Square. The Van Rensselaers—wealthy beyond their ability to spend their money—built themselves a four-story home on the corner of Walnut and Eighteenth, and decorated it with European originals or pieces copied from European originals: Empire moldings, Directoire balustrades, and even a ceiling decorated with portraits of the Doges of Venice.³



Fig. 2. The Van Rensselaer Mansion adaptively used.

In their own odd way, as expressions of the derivative taste of the American nouveau riche, these European pieces probably worked well in the mansion. The house had a

³ See 1801-1803 Walnut Street, Fell-Van Rensselaer Mansion folder, Philadelphia Historical Commission, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

certain grand sweep, a largeness of room and space, and could display and give meaning to highly decorated fireplaces, walls, ceilings, doorways, etc.

With the changes overtaking the city in the twentieth century, however, houses such as the Van Rensselaer Mansion became economically and socially impractical. The rich families moved out; the mansions decayed; and the social life that could tolerate such grand expressions of wealth and power passed away. In 1942, the Van Rensselaers gave up the fight, and their mansion on Walnut and Eighteenth passed through the hands of various tenants: a ritzy social club, a high-tone retailer, and, at last, “Urban Outfitters”—a would-be trendsetter, selling knock-offs of high fashion to guileless high school girls.⁴

In some sense, the mansion has been preserved as a result of these adaptive uses. The façade basically remains, though an extra door has been cut into the side facing Walnut Street. The interior was more or less gutted to make room for merchandise and to adhere to fire and building codes, but the most interesting architectural elements—the stained-glass dome in the entrance, the medallions decorating the ceiling of the dining room, the ornamental plaster scattered throughout the house—have been at least partially salvaged. They can still be seen by anyone willing to look past the merchandise displays.

In another sense, however, the effort to keep the mansion intact has been misguided, for nothing of the mansion remains to be preserved. This is not to say that what remains of the façade should be torn off or that the interior plaster ripped from the walls. But such architectural and decorating elements had their meaning and their effect on the viewer because they belonged to a house—a house with enough sweep and grandeur to

⁴ Ibid.

give the pieces scope and enough naked wealth and power to give the pieces force. The house gave itself and its parts context. One might well object to what it represented, but at least the house was what it was: it was real; it was itself.



Fig. 3. An original fireplace mantle of the Van Rensselaer Mansion ripped from its context.

The truth to which the postmodernists rightly point is a psychological one: the effect of making a large number of copies is that the original is finally turned into a copy itself—a copy of itself, or, worse, a copy of the copies of itself. When Ralph Lauren or Victoria's Secret or the Museum Store moves into an empty space in a shopping mall, they decorate the walls with cheap copies of the architectural elements found in nineteenth-century American mansions. It's only stage carpentry, of course—only a theatrical

set—but the attempt is to give the store the feeling of being a room in a wealthy person’s old house. When Urban Outfitters moved into the Van Rensselaer Mansion, they carefully preserved certain architectural details—for which they may deserve some praise. But they did the preservation in order to give their showrooms the feeling of a Ralph Lauren showroom that has the feeling of an old mansion. And Urban Outfitters already is an old mansion: the original became an imitation of the imitations of itself.

The result is finally a complete loss of the mansion. The only thing that gave the architectural elements meaning was their context, and that context has been destroyed by Urban Outfitters’ adaptive use. Their careful preservation of dissociated details, their narrowing of the sweep of the interior spaces (especially of the rotunda beneath the dome) are demonstrations of their desire to make the house “just like” a store in a mall—of their desire to make the house a copy of the copies of itself.

The Palace of Fine Arts

“Everything made now,” remarks George Kubler on the history of things, “is either a replica or a variant of something made a long time ago and so on back without a first break to the first morning of human time.”⁵ Kubler, with this statement, strengthens the postmodern claim that there are no originals left for us.

With this dim view, there are several options for preserving the past. We can replicate the original with new materials elsewhere, as was done in Nashville’s Parthenon, “the world’s only full-scale, full-color copy of the Parthenon in Athens.”⁶ Built of a less

⁵ George Kubler, *The Shape of Time: Remarks on the History of Things* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962), 79.

⁶ James Marston Fitch, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World* (New York: McGraw-Hill), 210.

than noble reinforced concrete, this 1920s replica is said to be more authentic than the ancient original: Tennesseans boast that the Greeks would have to study the correct details in Nashville in order to rebuild the original in Athens.⁷ We can also reconstruct the vanished originals, as was done in Virginia's Colonial Williamsburg, America's "living museum," where, with the restoration of eighty-two buildings, the reconstruction of 375 buildings, and the destruction of 616 buildings, a mix of old and modern-day copies mingle together to create a town that never really existed at any point in time. Or we can even demolish the decaying original and build a newer one in its place, as was done in San Francisco's Palace of Fine Arts. These three examples neither exactly preserve nor restore an existing building; they attempt, instead, to replicate a moment in time long past.

In the case of the Palace of Fine Arts, the duplicated palace is a replica masquerading as the original. The original structure, built by Bernard Maybeck in 1915 for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, was never meant to last. A temporary pavilion of lath and plaster has been made permanent with steel and concrete.

The exposition—originally an attempt to boost San Francisco out of an economic slump following the 1906 earthquake and fire—soon became the official international exposition for 1915, which was also the year celebrating the opening of the Panama Canal. There were ten exhibition palaces in all—built by several well-known architects such as McKim, Mead and White, Carrère and Hastings, and Henry Bacon—but Maybeck's palace was the one that drew the most attention, instantly changing his status from unknown draftsman to architect of the exposition's most admired structure.

⁷ See David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 291-293.

The Palace of Fine Arts was a composition of four separate classical structures surrounded by landscaping. Intended as an art gallery, only one of the structures was used for the exhibition of paintings. When asked how he had arrived at the right form for creating such a perfect harmony between architecture and nature, Maybeck pragmatically replied:

This process is similar to that of matching the color of ribbons. You pick up a blue ribbon, hold it alongside the sample in your hand, and at a glance you know it matches or it does not. You do the same with architecture; you examine a historic form and see whether the effect it produced on your mind matches the feeling you are trying to portray—a modified sadness or a sentiment in a minor key.⁸

Maybeck wanted to capture the vision of decaying structures crumbling and half-reverting to nature, where overgrown moss and lichen and other encrustation added the picturesque quality so much admired by the Romantics. His palace should suggest a sense of sadness, as did the structures depicted in the richly detailed engravings of G. B. Piranesi, whose picturesque ruins were a forerunner of late eighteenth-century Romanticism. Maybeck wanted the image of “[a]n old Roman ruin, away from civilization, which two thousand years before was the center of action and full of life, and now is partly overgrown with bushes and trees.”⁹ Piranesi’s engravings depicted a perishable Rome, devoured by time and nature. Ruins and decay suggest the transience of life; perhaps then, it was Maybeck’s intention to suggest the transience of architecture, since this palace was designed for an instant in time, “a consciously created fantasy that was part of the illusionary architecture of a world’s fair.”¹⁰

⁸ Bernard R. Maybeck, *Palace of Fine Arts and Lagoon* (San Francisco: Paul Elder, 1915), 9-10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

¹⁰ Kenneth H. Cardwell, *Bernard Maybeck: Artisan, Architect, Artist* (Santa Barbara: Peregrine Smith, 1977), 151.



Figs. 4a. and 4b. Bernard Maybeck wanted his Palace of Fine Arts (top) to capture the image of an old Roman ruin, away from civilization, as depicted in the richly detailed engravings of Piranesi (bottom).

The exposition lasted a little less than a year, and, even before it ended, the decision was reached that this transient piece of architecture would become permanent: Maybeck's Palace of Fine Arts was the only building not demolished. But, as a temporary structure, it could not be maintained for long without extensive and costly repairs. By the

late 1950s, its stucco-over-wire-lath exterior was a decayed ruin. Ironically, when it had finally achieved the melancholy note of vanquished grandeur, becoming the romantic ruin Maybeck had envisioned (when new, the structure had never been very ruin-like), the building was torn down and an identical one was put in its place.¹¹

In 1958, a bond issue to rebuild the rotunda was voted down. In 1959, however, a San Francisco resident gave \$2 million to save the structure; \$2 million more was matched by the state of California, and nearly equaled by the city of San Francisco. The whole project eventually cost \$8.5 million (the original had cost \$700,000).¹² Maybeck, who had watched the palace decay with pleasure, was ambivalent about its preservation: on the one hand, he tried to devise ways in which to encase the structure in plastic; on the other hand, he considered planting the site with redwoods, so that “children of the future might find bits of ornament and sculpture of a wondrous ruin of a previous generation among the trees.”¹³ Its reconstruction was completed in 1967, and it now stands as a permanent reminder of what was supposed to be fleeting architecture, a mere fantasy of architectural grandiosity.

Penn Station

Modeled after the third-century baths of Caracalla, and described as one of the greatest railway stations in the world, New York City’s Pennsylvania Station—McKim, Mead and White’s timeless vision of classical splendor—lasted for little more than fifty years. It took six years to build the station, and three years to destroy it: as an editorial in

¹¹ See “The Dream Made Permanent,” *Progressive Architecture* 49 (February 1968): 122.

¹² See David Morton, “Palace of Fine Arts,” *Progressive Architecture* 57 (November 1976): 66.

¹³ Cardwell, *Bernard Maybeck*, 152.

the *New York Times* put it, “[i]t’s not easy to knock down nine acres of travertine and granite, 84 Doric columns, a vaulted concourse of extravagant, weighty grandeur.”¹⁴

The decline of the soot-stained travertine marble and pink Milford granite building had begun long before it was slated for demolition: the ailing Pennsylvania Railroad had been trying for years to get rid of what had become to them a “white elephant.”¹⁵ They finally sold the site to the Madison Square Garden Corporation, which had plans to replace the elegant, neo-classical station with a circular, futuristic sports complex (the new train station would be relocated underground). The travertine marble taken from quarries near Tivoli, Italy—the same stone used to build Hadrian’s tomb, the Roman Coliseum, and the Basilica of Saint Peter’s—was to be replaced by concrete panels from the Plasticrete Corporation in Hamden, Connecticut.¹⁶

In 1962, upon learning that the railroad was attempting to save itself by sacrificing Penn Station, a small group of young architects—calling themselves the Action Group for Better Architecture in New York—banded together to protest. Their organized public protest—picketing the station, collecting signatures on petitions, and enlisting the aid of several renowned architects—did not stop the demolition; however, it did arouse enough public reaction, which helped establish the New York Landmarks Law. The passing of this law had been brewing since 1957, when the Municipal Art Society published a forty-page list of New York City structures deemed worthy of preservation. Among this list, of course, was Penn Station.

¹⁴ “Farewell to Penn Station,” *New York Times*, 30 October 1963, sect. A, 38.

¹⁵ See Foster Haily, “Battle Over Future of Penn Station Continues,” *New York Times*, 23 September 1962, sect. A, 78.

¹⁶ See Lorraine B. Diehl, *The Late, Great Pennsylvania Station* (New York: American Heritage, 1985), 28.

The loss of New York architecture and the preservation of old buildings had also been a concern of James Felt, the Chairman of the City Planning Commission; he was instrumental in establishing the Landmarks Preservation Commission—created to protect “structures and areas of historic or aesthetic importance.”¹⁷ (The planning commission had no jurisdiction over the preservation of the city’s architecture: it was permitted only to pass on the proposed use of land, therefore, it could not rule on the value of a building that was already on the site, only on the nature of its replacement.)¹⁸

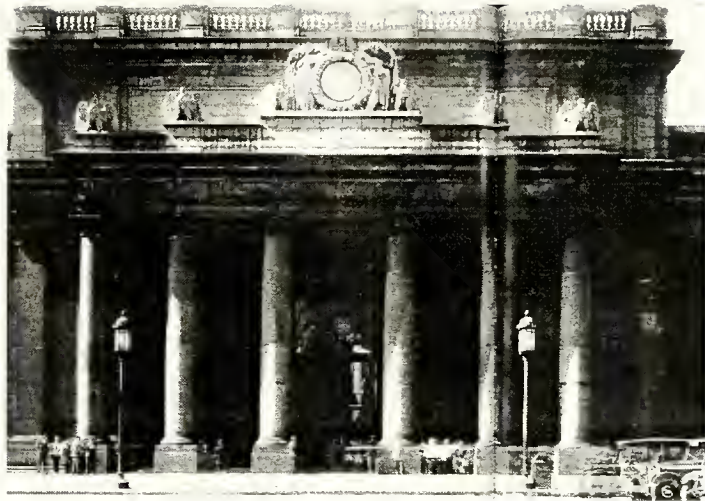
Felt asked the Chairman of Zoning and the President of the Municipal Art Society to write letters to the mayor recommending that an advisory committee be formed. In 1961, a thirteen-member advisory committee was appointed, and, in 1962, it was formally constituted as a mayoral commission. But it was only in 1965 that a Landmarks Law was passed, giving the Landmarks Preservation Commission authority to act on its decisions. By then, Penn Station was just a year away from total destruction. (Ironically, James Felt, who had worked so hard for the establishment of a Landmarks Law, disqualified himself from the Madison Square Garden zoning hearings because of conflict of interest: his brother, Irving Felt, was president of the Madison Square Garden Corporation.)¹⁹

In a 1962 article for *Time* magazine, Irving Felt, believing that the gain from the new buildings would offset any aesthetic loss, confidently claimed that “[f]ifty years from now, when it’s time for our Center to be torn down, there will be a new group of archi-

¹⁷ Ibid., 20.

¹⁸ See Ada Louis Huxtable, “Preservation or Perversion?,” in *Goodbye History, Hello Hamburger: An Anthology of Architectural Delights and Disasters* (Washington, D. C.: Preservation Press, 1986), 47.

¹⁹ See Diehl, *Late, Great Pennsylvania Station*, 28.



Figs. 5a. and 5b. Penn Station before demolition (top) and one of its preserved eagles (bottom), strangely out of context in front of Madison Square Garden.

pects who will protest.”²⁰ In 1982, Madison Square Garden was declared bankrupt; in 1984, the Garden’s then owners were seeking to demolish the complex and start again. There were no protests. Even an odd proposal to relocate the gloomy subterranean station

²⁰ Irving Felt, quoted in “Penn Pals,” *Time*, 10 August 1962, 42.

a few blocks further west drew little interest: as Vincent Scully put it, “[o]ne entered the city like a god, . . . one scuttles in now like a rat.”²¹

Only fragments of Penn Station have survived: a few of the eagles went to adorn the bridge outside Philadelphia’s Thirtieth-Street Station; one eagle sits in the Washington Zoo and another one went to the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York; two stone maidens went to Ringwood Manor and one went to the Brooklyn Museum. Everything else—the remaining stone maidens, the columns, the entablatures, the granite and marble moldings—were dumped in New Jersey’s Secaucus Meadows.²²

The Chicago Stock Exchange Building

Ripping fragments of buildings from their original contexts and then collecting and preserving them in museums has often been the last resort for preservationists. This descended into absurdity when, during the Christmas season following the demolition of Adler and Sullivan’s Chicago Stock Exchange Building, paperweights made of lucite-encased chips from its terra-cotta façade were being advertised and sold under the headline “Jingle Bell Rock.”²³

Several important Adler and Sullivan buildings have been demolished, but none created as much controversy as the Chicago Stock Exchange Building: demonstrators picketed in front of the building daily; scathing editorials and columns appeared regularly

²¹ Vincent Scully, quoted by Ada Louis Huxtable, in *New York Review of Books* (27 November 1975), in Steven Parissien, *Pennsylvania Station: McKim, Mead and White* (London: Phaidon, 1996), 24.

²² See Parissien, *Pennsylvania Station*, 23.

²³ See John Vinci, *The Trading Room: Louis Sullivan and the Chicago Stock Exchange* (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1989), 54.

in the pages of Chicago's newspapers; several local and national architectural organizations became involved, eventually taking the matter to court; and, most tragically and most dramatically, one man lost his life while gathering fragments of ornament from the partially-demolished, mutilated building, buried beneath the very fragments he was trying to save.²⁴

Located in downtown Chicago—in a thirty-five-square-block area known as “The Loop”—the thirteen-story Chicago Stock Exchange was denied official landmark status on the grounds that it would be a financial burden to the new owners, who could make a greater profit with a new building. (Many local and national architectural organizations had written to the City Council and the mayor, urging them to grant the building landmark status under the newly defined legal protection of the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks, but to no avail.)

Without any law to protect it, the tall, metal-framed commercial building was demolished to make way for another commercial building—newer, taller, with more modern amenities and thus more economically viable. Soaring forty-three stories above the ground, the glass and steel replacement, known as the Heller International Building, ironically ended up being a financial disaster: the developers were unable to meet the \$400,000 monthly payments on their \$41.3 million first mortgage. As Ada Louis Huxtable put it:

What is economically unviable now is a big building barely distinguishable from any of the other \$50 million jobs anywhere, and what was economically unviable before was a unique work of art and genius. Rehabilitation might have been considerably better. There

²⁴ See Richard Cahan, *They All Fall Down: Richard Nickel's Struggle to Save America's Architecture* (Washington, D. C.: Preservation Press, 1994), 9-26.

is a bitter lesson here in economics and environment. Sound business practice turned out to be both unsound investment and destructive urbanism.²⁵

Like Penn Station, fragments of the Chicago Stock Exchange have survived: when it was certain that the building would be demolished, several institutions expressed their interest in preserving parts of the building. (This was a nice side business for the Three Oaks Wrecking Company: according to standard demolition procedures, anything a wrecker can sell for salvage is part of the deal. They set up a small makeshift shop on the ground floor and sold stripped pieces of ornament.) New York's Metropolitan Museum, anxious to acquire their own bit of Sullivan, asked for the entrance arch along with five to seven of the surrounding bays. Their proposal: to reconstruct these fragments as one of the new park entrances to the museum—part of their new master plan. But, as Ada Louis



Fig. 6. The salvaged entrance arch from Adler and Sullivan's Chicago Stock Exchange Building, no longer serving its original purpose.

²⁵ Ada Louise Huxtable, "What's Best for Business Can Ravage Cities," *New York Times*, 6 April 1975, sect. 2, 30.

Huxtable put it, “[h]aving permitted destruction of the building, Chicago is reluctant to let the arch go.”²⁶

The building’s arch, along with its reconstructed trading room, ended up at the Chicago Art Institute. The trading room was “enshrined” in the institute, where one can glimpse the six different ornamental patterns of stenciling in some fifty-seven different shades of green, yellow, gold, rust, brown, and blue. The arch sits just outside the institute, no longer serving its purpose as an entrance, which the Metropolitan Museum had proposed, but as a sort of disembodied triumphal arch. What was not sold off was unceremoniously dumped in Lake Calumet on the city’s far south side.

The Gropius House

Considered a milestone of modernism when completed in 1938, the Gropius House, located in Lincoln, Massachusetts, was the U. S. home of renowned Bauhaus architect Walter Gropius for thirty years. In succeeding years, however, the house has come to be considered not one of his major contribution to architecture, and, as Henry-Russell Hitchcock writes, “no more successful than much of his work of the late twenties in Germany.”²⁷ But the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities nonetheless felt compelled to restore the house and “make it look right.”²⁸

But, in order to “make it look right,” the society was faced with several problems not encountered in their previous colonial restorations: what to do with mass-produced materials that had not aged well and that were no longer available. Ati Gropius Johansen,

²⁶ Ada Louis Huxtable, “A Bad End, And a Good Idea,” *New York Times*, 26 December 1971, sect. A, 24.

²⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Architecture: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (New York: Penguin, 1977), 524.

²⁸ Peter Gittleman, quoted in Alastair Gordon, “Back to the Future,” *Interiors* 151 (July 1992): 24.

Gropius's daughter and an advisor in the restoration, was certain that her father would have wanted for everything to look brand new; the society, however, felt that "a sense of time should be retained," and left the house's tarnished, time-worn chrome as it was.²⁹ (A curious choice, since accurately capturing the modernists' sense of their time and the expression of time in a modernist building would seem to dictate a sense of timeless and perpetual newness—of always new, unaged materials.)



Fig. 7. The Gropius House, a modernist classic carefully preserved by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities as an "authenticated antiquity."

On the other hand, the society completely replaced the old cork floors: the company that had manufactured the original floors still had Gropius's order on file and was therefore able to match them.³⁰ Ise Gropius, the architect's wife, had originally waxed the floors every week to keep them looking like new. But later years without waxing and an

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

attempt to remove the top surface with a rotary sander had ruined the original material.³¹ The preservation society, which tries in their projects to retain as much of the original fabric as possible, justified their action by reasoning that Gropius, were he still alive, would most certainly have replaced the worn flooring.³²

On surveying the interior work of the conservators, Ati Gropius Johansen made several changes (she wanted the house to look as though her parents would “walk in any minute”):³³ her father’s glasses were placed where he had always left them on his desk; a piece of sculpture was returned to its rightful place; the fireplace screen was opened (her parents would never have had the screen closed, as the conservators had done); the sofa was pushed back; the books were shoved against the wall; the tables were pulled out; even the branches in the fireplace were rearranged.³⁴ At last the modernist house was finished—carefully preserved by the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities as an “authenticated antiquity,” the youngest in the society’s collection.

The Marin County Civic Center

An even clearer, perhaps the finest, most ironic example one could ever hope to find in the absurdities of preservation occurred in the adaptation of the Marin County Civic Center: in the name of preserving Frank Lloyd Wright’s progressive, liberal design,

³¹ See Thomas Fisher, “Restoring Modernism: Updating Mass-Produced Parts,” *Progressive Architecture* 70 (April 1989): 111

³² Ibid.

³³ Ati Gropius Johansen, quoted in Jane Holtz Kay, “The Gropius House: Renovating a Modern Classic,” *New York Times*, 8 December 1988, sect. C, 1.

³⁴ See Michael J. Crosbie, “Restoring a Modern Milestone,” *Architecture* 77 (November 1988): 98.

an underground jail reminiscent of nothing so much as a medieval dungeon was constructed on Wright's site.³⁵

First commissioned in 1957, Frank Lloyd Wright's concept for the civic center was officially adopted by the Marin County Board of Supervisors in April of 1958. Wright was able to finish the plans for the center only just before his death, at the age of ninety-one. The associated architect, Aaron Green of San Francisco, together with Mrs. Wright and Wright's Taliesin staff, carried on the project after the architect's death.³⁶

In the 1970s, however, the civic center's jail and courthouse became the site of several high-profile trials that posed problems Wright had never anticipated: one judge was assassinated by a gun smuggled into a courtroom, and increased security required changes in design. But even more, the national increase in incarcerations, and Marin County's part as a center of drug-trafficking, led by the late 1980s to a need for larger and more secure jail-space in the Hall of Justice.³⁷

Wright's "organic integration" with the landscape made a building that cannot be extended easily or beautifully. The interior space is quite flexible, but the exterior would no longer hold the jail, and the exterior space is quite inflexible. Wright's executors and disciples led a public campaign against the idea of building a separate jail on the site as a betrayal of Wright's design:³⁸ Aaron Green, who worked on the project following

³⁵ See David B. Rosenbaum, "Out of Sight, Out of Mind," *Engineering News Record* 233 (12 September 1994): 18-19.

³⁶ See Bruce Brooks Pfeiffer, ed., *Letters to Apprentices: Frank Lloyd Wright* (Fresno: California State University Press, 1982), 11.

³⁷ See Roger Montgomery, "Frank Lloyd Wright's Hall of Justice," *Architectural Forum* 133 (December 1970), 55, and Aaron Green, *An Architecture for Democracy: Frank Lloyd Wright: The Marin County Civic Center* (San Francisco: Grendon, 1990), 102.

³⁸ See Paul Goldberger, "Jailhouse Blues: The Ballad of the Marin County Jail," *New York Times*, 25 March 1990, sect. H, 36.

Wright's death, argues in his book on the civic center that what Marin County needs is a changed legal culture rather than a new jail.³⁹ But at last, in a compromise achieved in the early 1990s, one of the hills of the site was hollowed out and an underground jail constructed. (In my own interview with Mr. Green, when I mentioned that I hadn't noticed the new facility, he solemnly replied, "Precisely.")

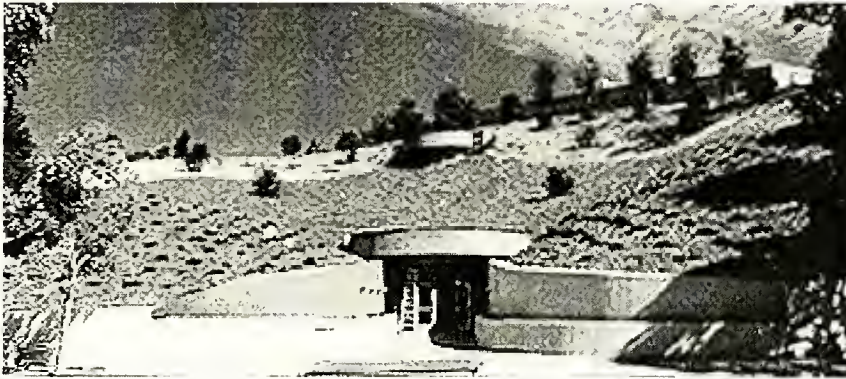


Fig. 8. Marin County Civic Center's controversial jail, a dirt-covered prison masquerading as a hill.

There is, of course, an inestimable absurdity in the unself-conscious declaration by one of Wright's disciples suggesting that the Marin Country jail problem should be solved not by reforming the building but by reforming criminal procedure: in order to preserve one building's integrity of design, a nation of 250 million people ought to completely reform its legal culture. Perhaps we ought to, but on the list of reasons for doing it, preservation of Frank Lloyd Wright's designs is going to come fairly low.

³⁹ See Green, *An Architecture for Democracy*, 102. "It would be better in all respects if law enforcement, treatment, and education were to be funded at a percentage of those costs to extricate the county from its exaggerated drug-related crime conditions. Creative law enforcement together with enlightened criminal justice application could serve the immediate needs of the community rather than the excessive construction of hotel facilities for criminals."

And there is yet another absurdity in the fact of maintaining Wright's organic integration of his buildings by turning one of the organically integrated features of the landscape into a dirt-covered prison masquerading as a hill. "Architectural features of the true democratic ground-freedom," Wright once declared, "would rise naturally from topography."⁴⁰

But the greatest absurdity comes when we remember that Wright often made claims about the political effect and purpose of his work: "Organic architecture," he said, "is the only true architecture for our democracy. The dynamic ideal we call democracy . . . has now every opportunity to found the natural democratic state in these United States by way of a natural economic order and a natural, or organic, architecture."⁴¹ In his original designs, Wright aimed to provide the prisoners with light and a view—though his plan was altered for security even while the building was under construction. But it is hard to imagine that Wright would countenance a jail entirely underground merely for the sake of preserving his earlier design.

Conclusion

In a lecture he delivered on the beauty of life, the Victorian William Morris said that imitative art is not and cannot be the same thing as ancient art, and cannot replace it; if we superimpose this work on the old, we destroy it both as art and as a record of history. The natural weathering of the surface of a building is beautiful, and its loss disastrous.⁴² Morris's near-contemporary John Ruskin put a similar thought when he wrote:

⁴⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright, quoted without citation in Green, *An Architecture for Democracy*, 2.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴² See John Piper, "Pleasing Decay," in *Buildings and Prospects* (Westminster: Architectural Press, 1948), 90.

[A]s for direct and simple copying, it is palpably impossible. What copying can there be of surfaces that have worn half an inch down? The whole finish of the work was in the half inch that is gone; if you attempt to restore that finish, you do it conjecturally; if you copy what is left, granting fidelity to be possible (and what care, or watchfulness, or cost can secure it?), how is the new work better than the old? There was yet in the old *some* life, some mysterious suggestion of what it had been, and of what it had lost; some sweetness in the gentle lines which rain and sun had wrought. There can be none in the brute hardness of the new carving.⁴³

Morris and Ruskin have not gone unchallenged. Rudolf Arnheim, for example, argues for a different view of duplication when he writes that “[i]t is not sensible to accept only original works as art and dismiss all reproductions as nonart.”⁴⁴ He adds that the distinction between original and reproduction oftentimes is anything but obvious; for example, the Ise Temple in Japan has been razed and rebuilt every twenty years since A. D. 478. Banning power tools and metal nails—since that would call the authenticity of the shrine into question—the Japanese maintain that the replica *is* the Ise Temple, as long as they use the same type of wood, the same type of tools, and the same construction technique when rebuilding.⁴⁵

Does this make the Japanese Ise Temple more authentic than the Palace of Fine Arts, which was built with stronger, more durable materials? To answer that question, one must think about which qualities of the original are maintained in duplication and which qualities are lost. Ada Louis Huxtable writes that “[t]hey have to do with the value of a lively original versus a dead copy, the integrity of a work of art as expressive of its

⁴³ John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (New York: Dover, 1989), 184.

⁴⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, “On Duplication,” in *The Forger’s Art: Forgery and Philosophy of Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 237.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

time, the folly of second-hand substitutes for first-rate inventions, the aesthetics and ethics of duplication measured against creative art.”⁴⁶

Huxtable names the keys to judging the failure of duplication in the Palace of Fine Arts and the Van Rensselaer Mansion. And she points us—with her invocation of two branches of philosophy, aesthetics and ethics—toward the need for a philosophical foundation for distinguishing good preservation from bad. But aesthetics and ethics are tangled disciplines today. The confusion in the law of copyright proves that it is not in fact as easy as Huxtable seems to think to speak of the “ethics of duplication.”

One danger derives from the anti-democratic impulse that of necessity begins to build in those who claim to have a special insight into a particular field’s ethics and aesthetics. The danger is always most acute when the specialists both claim a special insight and are unable to give a reasoned, philosophical justification of that insight which might be tested in a political arena.

Frank Lloyd Wright, for example, may have been correct in his claims to have begun a truly democratic, truly American style of architecture. (He professed Emerson as a forefather, although his claims have more of a Whitmanesque, “I sing the body electric” sound than the genuine Emersonian tone.) And in fact, Wright did express something uniquely democratic, uniquely American with his work—insofar as architecture can express American democracy. There is a reasonable claim that his buildings manifest an openness born of the frontier experience, a longing for rightness born of the Protestant heritage, a desire for frankness born of philosophical pragmatism, and an equality born of

⁴⁶ Huxtable, “Where the Past Meets the Future,” in *Goodbye History, Hello Hamburger*, 171.

the American Revolution. But there is something peculiar in the notion, apparently held by some of Wright's disciples and admirers, that the preservation of Frank Lloyd Wright's expression of democracy is too important to be left in the hands of the common people, but is the duty of an elite of appreciative architects.



Fig. 9. The Marin County Civic Center, Frank Lloyd Wright's expression of democracy.

In deciding among these middle-ground examples—sorting out good results from bad, good motives from bad—common sense is going to carry us a long way toward answering this question. We cannot preserve everything—even if it were metaphysically possible (which it isn't), it is not financially possible. We need to make choices and distinctions about historic preservation, and common sense will help. When a preservationist argues that the suburban ranch house is a dying art form in need of professional attention, the only commonsensical response is to lay back our ears and bray.

And yet, common sense is not going to sort out all the questions of historic preservation. Despite our at least apparently general cultural agreement that we should do

preservation, we lack a shared explanation for why we should do it—a coherent theory to which the culture generally subscribes.

Common sense, for example, is not sufficient to sort out the ironies involved in preserving a house out of the Bauhaus revolution, a “building of the future,” which served to break the grip of the corrupt and meaningless past on architectural forms—one of the buildings of those revolutionary architects who frowned upon preservation. Authentic modernist buildings were conceived as utilitarian, expendable machines. Indeed, there was a feeling that many modernist buildings were designed with a limited life expectancy in mind. Much of its work was often with untested materials and untried techniques, with the notion that once these buildings had served their purpose, they could be torn down to make way for newer buildings. The Gropius House has become a monument to a style that detested monuments.

Old buildings should look old, according to Ruskin, but where does that leave the modern buildings that were intended to look new? The marks of age—crumbling stone, peeling paint, cracked plaster—have to be eliminated and thus do not convey what we look for when we do historic preservation: a sense of the past. A modernist building ought not to show on its surface the passing of time, what the German architectural historian Alois Riegl would term as “age value.”⁴⁷ In order to look good, these buildings have to be crisp, and sharp, and clean. But time acts against all buildings and stains them; it dulls their colors and crumbles away their edges. In the modernist style, “signs of decay

⁴⁷ See Alois Riegl, “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin.” *Oppositions* 25 (Fall 1982): 20-51.

irritate rather than lend atmosphere.”⁴⁸ The taste for building decay is intimately linked with Ruskin’s restoration philosophy. Buildings should gain with age, but in a modern building, “[t]hat which looks white and pristine and excellent when it is completed may look dreary and spotted and dirty when smoky rain has dribbled down it for ten years.”⁴⁹

Although modernism has its admirers and although there are those who see in modernist buildings great beauty, the problem is this: if we believe the modernist principle, we ought to tear these buildings down once they get old; if we decide instead to violate the modernist principle, and make these buildings into monuments, we must be willing to shoulder the enormous expense. Alan Baxter, of English Heritage, gives us a solution similar to what was done for the Palace of Fine Arts: decaying modern buildings need not be preserved; instead, some examples should be demolished and replaced with replicas, stating that “those which are truly exceptional should be rebuilt as facsimiles using better current technology where appropriate.”⁵⁰

Part of the problem may lie in epistemology—the metaphysics of explanation. When we demand a theory for historic preservation, we are demanding something outside the actual practice of preservation; we are demanding what belongs ultimately to philosophy. And the same era, culminating in the 1970s and 1980s, that saw the rise of preservation in America saw as well, at least in academia, the rise of an attack on philosophical foundations: Frederick Jameson insisted that philosophy is imperialistic oppression;

⁴⁸ Ibid., 3.

⁴⁹ Piper, “Pleasing Decay,” 94.

⁵⁰ Giles Barrie, “‘Replicas’ Plan to Save Modern Listed Buildings,” *Building Design* (August 1993): 3.

Jacques Derrida called philosophy a sick “white mythology”; Richard Rorty demanded the replacement of philosophy with “light-minded aestheticism.”

In the late 1990s, we may be past the worst of this philosophical attack on philosophy. Rorty’s most recent book, for example, calls for a return to at least the political certainties of the old, 1930s-style Left; even while his star has very much dimmed in his native France, Derrida’s most recent work seems to call for a new, almost mystical certainty in the truth of democracy.⁵¹

This decay of anti-philosophy may allow us again to speak of philosophical anthropology, the psychology of the good life that demands some preservation of the past. If we can recognize that the failure of previous theory does not condemn all possibility of middle-ground theory, we can make some moves toward proposing, in a democracy, criteria for distinguishing good preservation from bad.

⁵¹ See Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), and Mark Lilla, “The Politics of Jacques Derrida,” *New York Review of Books* (25 June 1998): 36-41.

Theory from Viollet-le-Duc to Le Corbusier

From the Greeks who preserved the architectural forms of their original wooden temples in a more durable marble to the Japanese who preserved their sacred Ise Temple by dismantling it every twenty years and replacing it with a faithful replica built of similar materials, the impulse to preserve has existed since there were first things worthy of preservation. It was only in the nineteenth century, however, that the impulse became an institutionalized practice, and that ideas concerning restoration developed into preservation philosophies, with France and England leading the field of what was to become the modern preservation movement.

Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc

In France, the impulse to preserve was motivated by the French Revolution, which destroyed much of the country's medieval architecture. It inspired in the Victorians a yearning for a lost past: an increasing amount of literature concerning the Middle Ages satisfied their newfound fascination for everything Gothic, and the romantic writings of François-René de Chateaubriand, Charles Nodier and Baron Isidore Taylor, Alexandre Laborde, and Victor Hugo, among others, lent romance to things gone by and made the

public aware of the need to preserve what was still left. “The more remote these times,” wrote Chateaubriand in 1802, “the more magical they appeared.”¹ In their 1820 travel accounts, *Voyages Pittoresques and Romantiques dans l’Ancienne France*, Nodier and Taylor described themselves as the last travelers to see the ruins of ancient France, which would soon cease to exist. The less romantic and more pragmatic Laborde classified chronologically the monuments of France in two volumes.²

It was Victor Hugo, however, who not only wrote about French medieval architecture, but who also exerted the most influence in the need for its preservation and protection. In his 1823 *Bandes Noires*, Hugo vehemently attacked the notorious Bande Noire—brigands who were destroying France’s medieval monuments to obtain its stones for profitable use as second-hand building material. In an article entitled, “De la destruction des monuments en France,” Hugo called for some system of surveillance of monuments, since it would be impossible to recreate such works of art: they no longer had the genius of that age; industry had replaced art. And in his “Guerre aux démolisseurs!” Hugo was more explicit in calling for a solution to the problem of preservation, appealing for the creation of a law to protect and preserve medieval buildings, stating that if France did not preserve its medieval architecture, it would never again have any architecture worth preserving.³

¹ François-René de Chateaubriand, *Genius of Christianity* (1802) Pt. 3, Bk. 1, Ch. 8, 385.

² See Jacques Dupont, “Viollet-le-Duc and Restoration in France,” in *Readings in Historic Preservation: Why? What? Whom?*, eds. Norman Williams, Jr., et al. (New Brunswick, N. J.: Center for Urban Research, 1983), 9-17.

³ See Neil Levine, “The Book and the Building: Hugo’s Theory of Architecture and Labrouste’s Bibliothèque Ste-Geneviève,” in *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth-Century French Architecture*, ed. Robin Middleton (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 139-268.

And so it was that in 1830 the impulse became official: concerned with the state of decay of France's medieval inheritance, King Louis Philippe appointed archaeologist Ludovic Vitet—one of the “jeunes erudits” of Sunday salons—to the newly created post of Inspecteur Général des Monuments Historiques.⁴ Vitet, in turn, prompted the creation of the Commission des Monuments Historiques. The writer Prosper Mérimée (author of the novella *Carmen*, on which Bizet's opera was based) succeeded Vitet in 1835 as Inspecteur Général, with little success the first few years: following the Revolution, many buildings were in a sad state of disrepair, and the architects who worked on them knew little of medieval construction techniques.

In addition, the idea of restoration was still something quite novel.⁵ In 1840, the twenty-six-year-old Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc—an intimate of Mérimée and a self-taught architect who possessed knowledge of medieval architecture—was given his first major restoration, the Church of La Madeleine de Vézelay. Viollet-le-Duc successfully restored the crumbling church, which had been in a state of such near-collapse that no other architect would dare undertake the commission. Mérimée, when visiting the restoration in progress, became so impressed with Viollet-le-Duc's work that he invited the young architect to accompany him on his official visitations to historic sites throughout France.⁶ This collaboration would last for several decades.

⁴ See John Summerson, “Viollet-le-Duc and the Rational Point of View,” in *Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays on Architecture* (London: Cresset, 1949), 138.

⁵ See Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, *The Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc: Readings and Commentary*, ed. M. F. Hearn (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 271.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

It was during this period that Viollet-le-Duc carried out an extensive restoration campaign. One of the busiest restorers in France, Viollet-le-Duc is responsible for a variety of restoration projects—churches, cathedrals, chateaux, hotels de ville, and even an entire medieval city. (Enamored of the beauty of ruins, the English were less taken with his restoration methods: the Secretary of the Royal Institute of British Architects visited Viollet-le-Duc’s medieval city, Carcassonne, and “went away with a feeling of extreme disgust . . . a paltry plaything . . . no better example of the useless restoration going on in France.”)⁷

Viollet-le-Duc’s most important project, however, was the commission to restore Notre Dame de Paris—awarded to him and Jean-Baptiste-Antoine Lassus in 1844. As M. F. Hearn put it, “[i]t marked the moment when he became Mérimée’s protégé and was put on track to a central position in the Parisian cultural establishment.”⁸ (Victor Hugo, who published his *Notre Dame de Paris* in 1831, in which a great, decaying medieval building dominates the story and makes Gothic architecture touch the reader’s imagination, was a member of the board that had selected the architects for the restoration.)⁹

Viollet-le-Duc carried on the restoration for several years and, though no one challenged him, many were shocked with some of his decisions: he changed the form of the flying buttresses along the nave; he removed genuine thirteenth-century work in order

⁷ *Sessional Papers of the Royal Institute of British Architects 1865-66* (1866), 147, quoted in Stephan Tschudi Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration: A Study in English Restoration Philosophy* (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1976), 91.

⁸ M. F. Hearn, *Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc*, 2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

to “restore” what he thought had been there from the onset: and he ordered new replacements for the statues of the biblical kings that stood on the west façade—for which he had no archaeological evidence.¹⁰ (During the Revolution, all ninety original statues had been toppled and destroyed, the Gothic likenesses of the kings of France declared to stand as “monuments to fanaticism and royalty in the streets of Paris.”¹¹ The English, in their customary distaste for Viollet-le-Duc’s restorations, wrote of Notre Dame: “What Paris mobs have spared, however, will now be restored.”)¹² Viollet-le-Duc also replaced older materials with newer, better ones, stating:

In restorations there is an essential condition that must always be kept in mind. It is that every portion removed should be replaced with better materials, and in a stronger and more perfect way. As a result of the operation to which it has been subjected, the restored edifice should have a renewed sense of existence, longer than that which has already elapsed.¹³

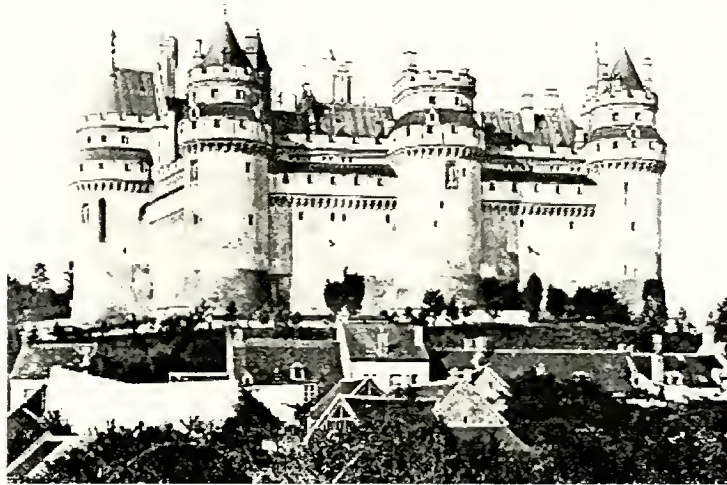
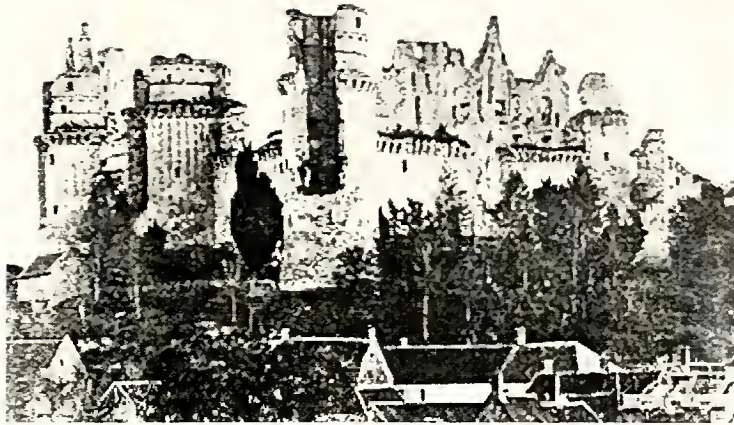
Architect, restorer, writer, and archaeologist, Viollet-le-Duc was the founder of the modern restoration movement: it was a new art and he therefore had to make new rules as he went along, formulating his own interpretation of the medieval Gothic structures he analyzed. His restorations were purposeful interpretations of historic monuments: few medieval monuments were built all at one time, and Viollet-le-Duc would make changes according to his “unity of style” theory. Viollet-le-Duc’s philosophy is perhaps best stated in his 1854 *Dictionnaire Raisonné de l’Architecture Française*, in which he writes: “The term restoration and the thing itself are both modern. To restore a building is

¹⁰ Ibid., 5-6.

¹¹ Carmen Gómez-Moreno, *Sculpture from Notre-Dame, Paris: A Dramatic Discovery* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979), 8.

¹² G. F. Bodley, “Church Restoration in France,” *The Ecclesiologist*, 21 (1861): 71, quoted in Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration*, 85.

¹³ *Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc*, 275.



Figs. 10a. and 10b. Viollet-le-Duc's restoration at Pierrefonds, in which he reinstated the castle in a state of completeness that could never have existed at any given time.

not to preserve it, to repair, or rebuilt it; it is to reinstate it in a condition of completeness that could never have existed at any given time."¹⁴ For Viollet-le-Duc, architecture had to do mainly with the faculty of reasoning: logic, documentation, and scientific accuracy—these were the pillars on which the principle of restoration was built.¹⁵ But even Viollet-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 269.

¹⁵ See Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration*, 15.

le-Duc was aware of the consequences of his philosophy, stating that “absolute principles may lead to absurdities.”¹⁶

John Ruskin

When England began to respond to its impulse to preserve, its response was in part a reaction against Viollet-le-Duc’s current methods of restoration, which were being practiced with the same enthusiastic zeal at home by restorers such as Sir George Gilbert Scott. Like France, England had become besotted with its medieval inheritance. “It is a striking paradox that as England became the first industrial nation,” observes the scholar Charles Dellheim, “it became increasingly fascinated by its preindustrial past.”¹⁷ The romance of medieval architectural forms, paintings, and novels provided relief from the new era, which was becoming increasingly industrial and rationalistic. Victorians turned to the Gothic for all the qualities they found lacking in contemporary life: the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque.

From the historical novels of Walter Scott to the Arthurian romances of Alfred Tennyson, writers provided an escape to the past. Artists, as well, depicted the passage of time: a genre of Romantic art appeared in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that pictured—in soft pencil or watercolor wash—what existing buildings would look like after centuries of decay. “Fantasizing decay afforded romantic artists welcome relief from the humdrum present,” writes historian David Lowenthal. “Hubert Robert’s ruinous *Louvre*, Joseph Gandy’s decrepit *Bank of England* were pleasing partly because the imputa-

¹⁶ *Architectural Theory of Viollet-le-Duc*, 274.

¹⁷ Charles Dellheim, *The Face of the Past: The Preservation of the Medieval Inheritance in Victorian England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), xiii.

tion of decay abolished their workaday functions.”¹⁸ From the contemplation of ruins in paintings and literature came the eighteenth-century fashion of building artificial ruins—“producing new Tivolis”—which sprang up in every fashionable gentleman’s grounds.¹⁹

The writer John Ruskin, on viewing restorations in his country as well as abroad, developed his own philosophy toward the subject. Before him, Mérimée had formulated his own definition of restoration in his *Rapport sur la restauration de Notre Dame de Paris* of 1845, in which he states: “By restoration we understand the conservation of that which exists and the recreation of that which has definitely existed.”²⁰ Ruskin, believing that restoration was a lie from beginning to end, vehemently contradicts Mérimée and Viollet-le-Duc in his 1849 *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*:

Neither by the public, nor by those who have the care of public monuments, is the true meaning of the word *restoration* understood. It means the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered; a destruction accompanied with false description of the thing destroyed. Do not let us deceive ourselves in this important matter; it is *impossible*, as impossible as it is to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture. That which I have above insisted upon as the life of the whole, that spirit which is given only by the hand and eye of the workman, never can be recalled. Another spirit may be given by another time, and it is then a new building; but the spirit of the dead workman cannot be summoned up, and commanded to direct other hands, and other thoughts.²¹

Ruskin, who had a deep respect for medieval craftsmanship, believed that there exists an obligation toward the monuments of the past, both as historical documents and as religious heritage. As the scholar Stephan Tschudi Madsen put it, Ruskin adhered to the principle “that the very earth is a gift from God which is only given to us to be ad-

¹⁸ Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 168.

¹⁹ See Rose Macaulay, *Pleasure of Ruins* (New York: Walker, 1953), 23-24.

²⁰ Prosper Mérimée, quoted without citation in Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration*, 15.

²¹ Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 184.

ministered, it is entailed on us, and this earth and the contribution of human beings to its development are to be preserved and passed on to the next generation."²²

A full-scale revolt against French restoration practices did not begin until the 1870s. The first to take initiatives were the followers of Ruskin, with the painter William Morris leading the group. In 1877, he formed the Society for the Protection of Ancient Monuments; founded mainly to protect medieval buildings, it soon broadened its scope to include buildings of other periods. Like most Victorians, Morris was infatuated with the Gothic, but "as a true preservationist he did not want to confine protection to one style or one period."²³ Morris echoed Ruskin's beliefs when he argued for preservation:

It has been most truly said . . . that these old buildings do not belong to us only; that they have belonged to our forefathers and they will belong to our descendants unless we play them false. They are not in any sense our property, to do as we like with. We are only trustees for those who come after us.²⁴

Ruskin and his followers wished to preserve old buildings as they had survived. Modern technical methods were to be applied to stabilize the structure, but unlike Viollet-le-Duc's methods, it was to be done without changing the structure's outward appearance: no attempts should be made to add, alter or restore. In response to current restoration methods—the restorers' practice of removing plaster from the walls of the buildings they

²² Madsen, *Restoration and Anti-Restoration*, 46.

²³ Nikolaus Pevsner, in Jane Fawcett, ed., *The Future of the Past: Attitudes to Conservation 1174-1974* (New York: Watson-Guptill, 1976), 51.

²⁴ William Morris, Speech at Annual Meeting of SPAB, Report 1889, quoted in Fawcett, *Future of the Past*, 16.

repaired, of “scraping” away the surface and hence all visible marks of antiquity—Morris nicknamed his method “anti-scrape.”²⁵

Although these theories and technical methods were enthusiastically followed, the government did not pass a protective law until 1882. This law, the Ancient Monuments Protection Act, was a compromise: various bills had been introduced to the House of Commons calling for the protection of ancient monuments, but all were opposed for they “appeared to involve unjust interference with private property.”²⁶ The Act made vandalism by members of the public punishable, but it could not keep the owner of an ancient monument from destroying or neglecting his property: when Commissioners informed an owner of ruins that his property was in a bad state of disrepair, his reply was that “they are ruins now, and if they fall they will be ruins still . . . What more do you want?”²⁷

Ruskin himself was a lover of ruins: it was not only inevitable that the passage of time leave its mark on a building, for Ruskin, it was desirable. Weathering, the “finish” the environment puts on a building over time, was seen as a romantic aging that enhanced a building’s appearance.²⁸ Medieval stone buildings, especially, weathered gracefully: dirt, carried in the air or deposited by rainwater, settled on these buildings and created what

²⁵ See John Summerson, “Ruskin, Morris, and the ‘Anti-Scrape’ Philosophy,” in *Historic Preservation Today: Essays Presented to the Seminar on Preservation and Restoration, Williamsburg, Virginia, September 8-11, 1963* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1966), 28.

²⁶ Nikolaus Boulting, in Fawcett, *Future of the Past*, 17.

²⁷ The Rev. J. A. Bennett, in Fawcett, *Future of the Past*, 17.

²⁸ See Mohsen Mostafi and David Leatherbarrow, *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

the Romantics found to be an aesthetically pleasing play of light and shadow in its crevices. Even buildings weathered to the point of almost virtual destruction were seen as picturesque.



Fig. 11. While traveling through Italy, the writer John Ruskin was able to capture in his drawings the picturesque quality of what the Romantics found to be pleasing decay.

The greatest glory of a building was not in its stones; the greatest glory of a building was in its age: “in that deep sense of voicefulness, of stern watching, of mysterious sympathy, nay, even of approval or condemnation, which we feel in walls that have

long been washed by the passing waves of humanity.”²⁹ Ruskin pointed out how modest was our place in history, and that his generation had no right to destroy historic monuments: “Hence it is no light sin to destroy anything that is old; more especially because even with the aid of all obtainable records of the past, we, the living, occupy a space of too large importance and interest in our own eyes; we look upon the world too much as our own.”³⁰

For both Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, the impulse to preserve derived from a passionate interest in medieval architecture. But Viollet-le-Duc’s impulse was born out of Rationalism: Gothic architecture was the work of those who understood the logic of rational construction. And Ruskin’s impulse was born out of Romanticism: Gothic architecture was the work of those who loved their work and thus endowed it with beauty. “[W]heras the independent creator of the great cathedrals to Ruskin was a rough craftsman,” wrote Nikolaus Pevsner, “to Viollet-le-Duc he was a highly intelligent designer.”³¹ To the work of these two men, there came to full expression the Rationalist and Romantic impulses to preserve, and these expressions are still very much with us: preservation at the present day still finds itself attempting to find some solution to the antipathy of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin.

²⁹ Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 177.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Nikolaus Pevsner, “Ruskin and Viollet-le-Duc: Englishness and Frenchness in the Appreciation of Gothic Architecture,” in Lamia Doumato, ed., *Eugène Emmanuel Viollet-le-Duc, 1814-1879* (New York: Rizzoli, 1980), 51.

Modernism

One solution is simply not to preserve—or at least not to create buildings that inspire preservation. Though he would hardly have phrased his purpose in terms of the opposition between Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, in 1923 Le Corbusier wrote that “[w]ithin the next twenty years, a building will no longer be a solidly-built thing that sets out to defeat time and decay: it will be a tool.”³² Many modern buildings were designed with a limited life expectancy in mind. Much modernist work was often with untested materials and untried techniques, with the notion that once these buildings had served their purpose, they could be torn down to make way for newer buildings.

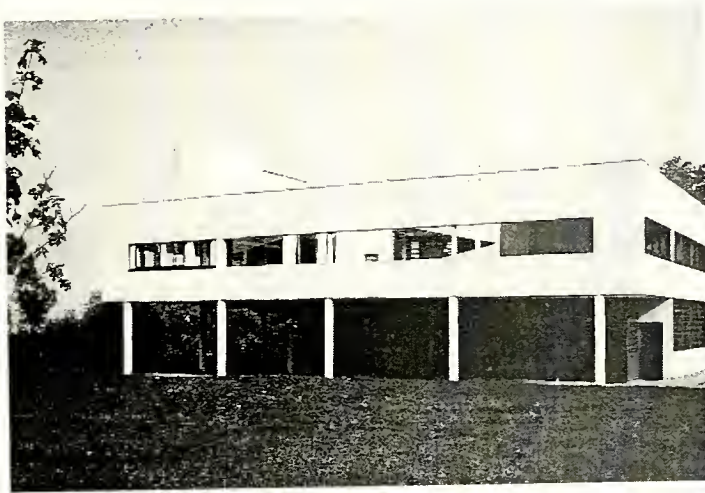
It might be argued that, despite Le Corbusier’s writings, he and his disciples did not in fact intend their buildings to be disposed of, that in reality they intended their buildings to last longer than one generation. One purpose of rhetoric like “expendable machines” is simply its value to shock: its literal truth or falsity is beside the point of its usefulness in provoking a break with the past, a break with all previous traditions, and a turn toward what the poet W. H. Auden called “new styles of architecture, a change of heart.”³³ Modernists like Le Corbusier were much influenced by the provocative writings of the futurist architect Antonio Sant’Elia, who proclaimed in his 1914 *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture* that “houses will last less time than we do,” that each generation will have to build its own city.³⁴ But Sant’Elia’s demand for “perishable art” was clearly in

³² Le Corbusier, quoted without citation in Martin Pawley, “A Modern Morituri,” Conference Proceedings: First International DOCOMOMO Conference, September 12-15, 1990, eds. Hubert-Jan Henket and Wessel de Jonge (Eindhoven, Netherlands: Eindhoven University of Technology, 1991), 65.

³³ W. H. Auden, “Sir, No Man’s Enemy, Forgiving All,” in *The English Auden*, ed. Edward Mendelson (London: Faber and Faber, 1977), 36.

³⁴ Antonio Sant’Elia, quoted without citation in Ryner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (New York: Praeger, 1960), 135.

tended to be rhetorical. Le Corbusier's own book, *Towards a New Architecture*, in which he states that we should "purge our houses, give your help that we may construct our towns," has a distinctly futurist tone.³⁵



Figs. 12a. and 12b. Le Corbusier's 1929 Villa Savoye, only thirty years after construction, was no longer a solidly built thing that set out to defeat time and decay.

And, in fact, once the break with the past had been made, we find modernists, or writers who write about modernists, especially Hitchcock and Johnson in their 1932 *The International Style*, openly discussing the durability of materials and the difficulty of

³⁵ Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Dover, 1986), 24.

finding materials that don't show premature signs of aging, specifically the surface materials, the all-important white walls of modernity. They devote an entire chapter to the cause, and, as Alice Jurow describes it, "[i]t is a chapter concerned, almost obsessed, with the problem of finding finish materials which can achieve the principle of continuous wall surface with minimal interference from 'flaws that come with time.'"³⁶

It seems that when modernists actually got down to building buildings rather than talking about building buildings, their practice in some ways contradicted their theory. A number of key figures of the Modern Movement were not so much concerned with the practical aspect of architecture as with the intellectual aspect, ideals that existed independent of a building's structural reality. They succeeded in carrying out their declared program when it came to considerations such as the doing away with ornament and replacing it with a simple layer of white paint. But as regards the constructions themselves, they seemed to encounter a pair of difficulties.

The first difficulty is logical, involving the fact that buildings by their very nature are built for a certain level of permanence. Even Hitchcock and Johnson note that "[t]he idea of permanence has always been associated with architecture" and that "temporary constructions are seldom as architectural in character as those built to endure."³⁷ Buildings must be strong enough to withstand certain extremes of nature; they must be sturdy enough to keep out the rain. Moreover, they involve an investment of the human capitals

³⁶ Alice Jurow. "The Immaculate Conception: Aging and the Modernist Building." *Archetype 2* (Fall 1982): 13.

³⁷ Henry-Russell Hitchcock and Philip Johnson. *The International Style* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1966), 82.

of money and time that demand from them a certain return expressed in years of livability.

The second difficulty is psychological. No artist with any kind of ego—and one can assume that Le Corbusier and other modernists had healthy egos—can build for the moment. The very psychology of creation introduces into the work of art a desire for permanence. And, in fact, Le Corbusier's practice shows this pattern: within a few years of his modernist classics, Le Corbusier not only participated in the restoration of his own work, but also began to build timeless buildings.

As Peter Blake notes, “the leading apostle of Machine Art” went on to build structures that were “all concrete—concrete in its crudest, most brutal form. *betón brut!* Concrete . . . as rough and virile as rock, deliberately chipped and cracked.”³⁸ Unlike the Villa Savoye, whose tired white stucco façade was beginning to show premature signs of aging, Le Corbusier's later concrete structures sought a way of building that still used a modern material, but which would age as well as any of the ancient buildings of Rome. Other modernists, such as Mies van der Rohe, built from the beginning in more durable materials, and much of the decay of modernist buildings derives merely from the fact—which they did not intend—that the new materials and techniques were imperfectly understood.

And so the fact remains that, intended or not, the Modern Movement buildings' current condition matches the modernists' rhetoric and thus provides presumptive evidence of the rhetoric's truth. The turn by Le Corbusier was exactly that: a turn, which

³⁸ Peter Blake, *The Master Builders* (New York: Knopf, 1961), 118-119.

marks a change in his work. His early designs may have been for disposable buildings, and his later participation in some historic restoration is not an infallible sign of his youthful intentions. The imperfectly understood materials and techniques that are now decaying in a very ugly way are in fact the logical and necessary result of his demand for a break with the past. The weakness of experimental buildings is one of the reasons they are “experimental.” The modernist apostles of the Machine Age did not succeed in their effort to leave behind the question of preservation—the tired, old opposition of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin. They succeeded only—with their rapidly decaying buildings—in intensifying the problem for subsequent generations.

Theory in the Late Twentieth Century

In this hunt for a solution to the opposition of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, the United States faces a unique situation. Part of the American problem of preservation is a lack of consensus: unlike nineteenth-century France and England, it seems feasible in twentieth-century America neither to start pounding away at antique buildings, as Viollet-le-Duc thought proper, nor to leave their ruins to molder away picturesquely, as Ruskin thought proper.

But a greater problem is that America is not a nation with any medieval buildings to preserve. The preservation philosophies of nineteenth-century Europe had little impact in the United States before the twentieth century, and—more important—applied awkwardly to the American situation. Much can be gleaned from the writings of Viollet-le-Duc and Ruskin, if for no other reason than that most preservation practice and theory derives from their work. But in America—which both lacks a national consensus of the kind that could emerge in France or England and lacks the imposing public Gothic architecture that gave rise to preservation in Europe—the preservation movement has looked for theory primarily to contemporary academic writings (though they often look to modern European models).

Several noted authors—preservationists, historians, architects, urban planners—gladly tell us why we should preserve, why we shouldn't preserve, what happens when we do preserve, what happens when we don't preserve, etc. Some books offer a solid background in the field as it is practiced today; others trigger theoretical speculation concerning preservation; but none develop a coherent theory solely for the field of historic preservation.

The title of Charles B. Hosmer's *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg*, gives more than a hint of what the book contains: Hosmer writes painstakingly about the evolution of the American preservation movement. His work, as Hosmer puts it, "treats almost every type of preservation group that appeared in the United States before 1926."¹ He writes about the first evidence of preservation sentiment (an utterly forgettable notation in the pocket diary of Benjamin H. Latrobe in 1796) to the first clear-cut example of an organized preservation movement (the preservation of the small New England town of Deerfield); he writes about early preservation examples ranging from Mount Vernon to Monticello; he writes about organized preservation groups ranging from the Ladies of Mount Vernon to the Daughters of the American Revolution; he writes about preservation activities all over the United States, from north to south, from east to west.

When Hosmer finally arrives at his chapter on criteria for selecting buildings worthy of preservation, he gives us a tidy and, on the whole sensible, list: patriotic inspiration, local and civic pride, the need for exhibition areas, family pride, commercial ob-

¹ Charles B. Hosmer, *Presence of the Past: A History of the Preservation Movement in the United States Before Williamsburg* (New York: Putnam, 1965), 22.

jectives, and architectural and aesthetic enjoyment. In his introduction, Hosmer mentions that “details have been limited in most cases, because such a comprehensive scope is beyond the practical limits of a volume of that kind.”² But though the book—and, indeed, its sequel in two volumes, *Preservation Comes of Age: From Williamsburg to the National Trust, 1926-1949*—provides a helpful summary of preservation’s evolution in America, it gives no coherent theory as to why preservation should happen in the first place.

James Marston Fitch—architect, preservationist, architectural historian, and, in 1965, founder at Columbia University of the first preservation program in the United States—would appear to be an ideal candidate to write the modern-day theory of historic preservation. And he finally published his book on the subject in 1982, entitling it, *Historic Preservation: Curatorial Management of the Built World*.

In the book’s first sentence, Fitch explains his intentions: “This book aims to provide an overview of the urgent problems connected with the management of the built world, as well as offer a holistic theoretical apparatus for a wise and civilized system of solving them.”³ He does this with an array of examples of preservation both in the United States and abroad. Fitch provides us with an overview of preservation as a movement, beginning with why we should save the built environment—the “prototype”—and then going on to several different topics of interest: economic and conceptual parameters, urban regeneration, restoration and conservation, adaptive use, reconstruction and reproduction, architectural museums, cosmetic consequences of intervention, new systems in

² Ibid.

³ Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, xi.

old fabrics, historic landscapes, sites and ruins, analysis and documentation, maintenance, interpretation, training, preservation in socialist and third world countries, and, finally, the future of the movement.

The promised “holistic theoretical apparatus,” however, never quite materializes. Concerned primarily with the bureaucratic role of preservationists, Fitch gives a well-organized overview of preservation concerns. But deeply convinced of the moral rectitude of preservation, Fitch at last offers no coherent theory as to why preservation should be pursued.

David Lowenthal

The first scholarly attempt to treat—if not exactly in a systematic way, then at least in a suggestive, wide-ranging way—the preservable past as an epistemological or even an ontological *object* came in 1985 with David Lowenthal’s monumental *The Past Is a Foreign Country*. A historian trained at Harvard and Berkeley and distinguished by having held chairs in four different subjects, Lowenthal was well-placed to seek the connections between history, psychology, philosophy, and even such distant fields as geology for the explanation of why we desire to preserve.

He draws his title from a line in L. P. Hartley’s *The Go-Between*: “The past is a foreign country,” said Hartley, “they do things differently there.” But Lowenthal’s title is at least in part ironic, for he argues—against Hartley and, particularly, against J. H. Plumb’s famous argument about the alienness of history in his 1969 book, *The Death of*

the Past—that in fact the past’s “features are shaped by today’s predilections, its strangeness domesticated by our own preservation of its vestiges.”⁴

Lowenthal divides *The Past Is a Foreign Country* into three general movements: “Wanting the Past” in Chapters One through Four, “Knowing the Past” in Chapter Five, and “Changing the Past” in Chapters Six and Seven.

In “Wanting the Past,” after taking up the obvious question of what benefits the past seems to bring us, Lowenthal takes up the attitude toward history at four specific moments: the Renaissance, the early modern world of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century England and France, Victorian England, and revolutionary and post-revolutionary America. In Chapter Four—sketching such examples as Oscar Wilde’s *The Portrait of Dorian Gray*, the historical cycles imagined by Vico, Henry Fuseli’s famous 1778 drawing *The Artist Moved by the Grandeur of Ancient Ruins*, and Lord Elgin’s 1814 decision to leave unrestored the marbles he rescued from the Acropolis—Lowenthal argues that the prejudice in favor of newness and youth for some artifacts is matched by a prejudice in favor of age for others.

In “Knowing the Past,” Lowenthal enters an old argument about the legibility of objects from the past, about how we can ever know the past at all—an argument perhaps best summarized in William B. Hesseltine’s critical 1957 essay “The Challenge of the Artifact,” which praises the ability of material culture’s remains to inform us about the

⁴ Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, xvii.

past.⁵ Admitting that “memory and history both derive and gain emphasis from physical remains,” Lowenthal nonetheless believes, in opposition to the “material” historians, that “physical remains have their limitations as informants. . . . They are themselves mute, requiring interpretation.”⁶ Only those artifacts deliberately created to carry information—“pictures and sculpture that represent or reflect ideas about the past”⁷—are actually open for our interrogation.

In “Changing the Past,” Lowenthal takes up the vexed questions that revolve around the past’s presentation of itself and our attempts to grasp, recollect, and preserve that presentation. “Manipulation makes the past both more and less like the present—less because we set it apart, more because we put our own stamp on it. Even if we aim to preserve things just as they were or as we find them, protective and restorative devices mantle the past in the machinery of the present.”⁸ Lowenthal takes up such ironic examples as the ancient American Indian adobe structure at Casa Grande “overwhelmed by its glass and steel protective roof,”⁹ the relocation of London Bridge in the American southwest, the bisected copy of Trajan’s Column in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Nashville duplication of the Parthenon. And he uses his examples to argue the dual nature of preservation: “We cannot function without familiar environments and links with a recognized past, but we are paralyzed unless we transform or replace inherited relics.”¹⁰

⁵ Reprinted in Thomas J. Schlereth, ed., *Material Culture Studies in America* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1982).

⁶ Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, xxiii.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁸ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 276.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

In his conclusion, Lowenthal—with some self-mockery, but nonetheless genuinely—embraces the “creative anachronism” of the Eldon League, whose motto is “Forward Into the Past!” “Merely to know *about* the past is not enough,” he argues. “What is needed is the sense of intimacy.”¹¹

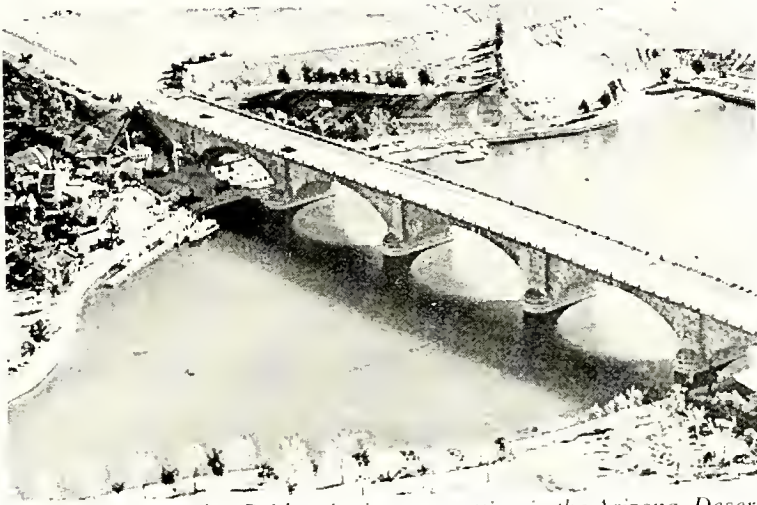


Fig. 13. *The London Bridge in its new setting in the Arizona Desert, where the ozone in the atmosphere is eroding London's historical soot of half a century from the stonework.*

Though he bemoans “the modernist breach with classical and biblical legacies”¹²—what the theologian Robert Jenson calls “How the World Lost Its Story”¹³—he nonetheless admits that the breach has taken place and we no longer live in a perceived continuity with the long-running story of Western civilization. But he simultaneously rejects the postmodern view of the past as a “stylistic warehouse.”¹⁴ And his solution to this

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 378.

¹² *Ibid.*, xxv.

¹³ Robert W. Jenson, “How the World Lost Its Story,” *First Things* 36 (October 1993): 19-24.

¹⁴ Lowenthal, *Past is a Foreign Country*, 383.

apparent contradiction is an acceptance of the existing alienness of the past, but a refusal to allow the unity and story of the past to slip further away. The past *is* a foreign country, but not so foreign that it is beyond all understanding and appreciation. What remains of the story must be cherished, even though there are many ironies that result from the practices of that cherishing: “the past is best used by being domesticated—and by our accepting and rejoicing that we do so.”¹⁵

Attractive as it is, what Lowenthal offers is at last an attitude rather than a philosophy. Recognizing that “[t]he rage to preserve is in part a reaction to anxieties generated by modernist amnesia,”¹⁶ he cannot do more than recommend simply that we embrace those anxieties and rejoice in them: “Nothing ever made has been left untouched, nothing ever known remains immutable; yet these facts should not distress but emancipate us.”¹⁷ And yet, precisely because it gives us no criterion other than attitude for judging a particular preservation project, Lowenthal is unhelpful in precisely the realm in which we need help. The middle-ground projects we face when we actually do preservation are not sold to doubters by a claim of superior attitude.

Manfredo Tafuri

A professor of Architectural History at the Institute of Architecture in Venice from 1968 to 1994, Manfredo Tafuri was a prolific writer, producing some twenty-three books in which he considered issues and controversies in contemporary architecture.

¹⁵ Ibid., 412.

¹⁶ Ibid., xxiv.

¹⁷ Ibid., 412.

planning, and conservation. His best known and most influential book remains his *Theories and History of Architecture*.

In this book, the neo-Marxist Tafuri announced the death of architecture, advancing the view, as Herbert Muschamp describes it, that “architecture itself was a beautiful corpse, an art form no longer sustainable in the modern world.”¹⁸ Modernism’s attempt to dominate the future through pure reason, argues Tafuri, was a failure: “technology seemed to show, only then, its ideal emptiness and its alienating power; the anti-historicism of the avant-gardes, ignored in its deeper implications, was seen as a contingent and resolvable, if not already solved, phenomenon.”¹⁹

Tafuri was not the first to proclaim the death of architecture: in a chapter of his 1831 *Notre Dame de Paris* entitled “Ceci tuera cela” (“This Will Kill That”), Victor Hugo came to the conclusion that architecture was dead beyond recall, and that buildings had lost forever the power to express human thought, relinquishing that power to the printed word. The thought of ages and nations would now be embodied in the book rather than the building: “the book of stone, so solid and durable, would give way to the book of paper, which was more solid and durable still.”²⁰

But though he doesn’t mention his French forerunner, Tafuri agrees that modern architecture, in sweeping aside the outdated forms of history, has lost the power to express all meaning. Architecture once depended upon its ability to express ideas, but ar-

¹⁸ Herbert Muschamp, “Nocturne For the Marxist of Venice,” *New York Times*, 8 May 1994, sect. H, 37.

¹⁹ Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 50.

²⁰ Victor Hugo, *Notre-Dame de Paris*, trans. John Sturrock (London: Penguin, 1978), 189.

chitects nowadays seem unable to dictate any meaning at all with their buildings. To take an example from the days after Tafuri's death in 1994, the much-employed Washington, D. C. restorationist architect Arthur Cotton Moore recently proposed the backing of the White House's wrought-iron fence with explosion-proof glass.²¹ And we, examining Moore's proposal, might with equal plausibility interpret it as an example of totalitarianism, socialism, or democratic capitalism. Hugo blames technology: the killed-off "that" was architecture, murdered by the "this" of the steam-driven printing press. And Tafuri as well sees technology as the erosion of values, caused by the excessive production and consumption of advanced capitalistic societies.



Fig. 14. Arthur Cotton Moore's proposed protective glass fence for the White House might have been interpreted by the neo-Marxist Manfredo Tafuri as an example of totalitarianism, socialism, or democratic capitalism.

²¹ See Arthur Cotton Moore, *The Powers of Preservation: New Life for Urban Historic Places* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998), 190-194.

In *Theories and History of Architecture*, first published in Italian in 1968 and translated in the United States only in 1979, Tafuri addresses the failure of historians and architects to grasp the historical setting of architectural theory. In six chapters, he lays out a program that is, first, a devastating debunking of the modernists who thought that they could build something so new that it escaped even its own historical setting, and, second, a withering attack on the postmodernists who imagine that they can use their buildings as a critique of history, and, third, a call for a new critical practice that surmounts architecture as a metalanguage that, though unavoidably historical (as every species of Marxist must admit), it nonetheless recognizes its difference from the architecture it criticizes.

In a clarifying note added to the second Italian edition, Tafuri declares the single purpose of his work: “just as it is not possible to found a Political Economy based on class, so one cannot ‘anticipate’ a class architecture (an architecture ‘for a liberated society’); what is possible is the introduction of class criticism into architecture.”²² The rapid emergence of the ultimate Marxist utopia—the permanent revolution of the proletariat, the withering away of the state, and the final emergence of the classless society—may at present be unlikely (to say the least), but the critical task is not thereby abrogated.

With the historical method of dialectical materialism, the critic of architecture is able to distinguish criticism from the buildings it criticizes, setting both in their proper—and not identical—historical contexts. Tafuri’s great success, as James S. Ackerman puts it, is to show, “more persuasively than other positions to the left, how architectural history in particular was woven into the social, economic, and political fabric of the time being

²² Tafuri, *Theories*, iii.

examined. Tafuri did this in ways that earlier efforts to illuminate architecture through its social ambiance could not."²³

Bemoaning the "merging of the character of architect and critic in the same person," Tafuri believes that in the world of late capitalism the "pure critic" is rightly perceived as a "dangerous figure."²⁴ Denying the conflict between Le Corbusier and Frank Lloyd Wright, Tafuri praises both the modern architects for their recognition of the "historicity of their anti-historicism."²⁵ But both architects, believes Tafuri, took for granted that "the historical centers, if used as 'pieces' of the contemporary city, *are dangerous to life*."²⁶ And they represent the very best of the moderns.

Through his first two chapters—"Modern Architecture and the Eclipse of History" and "Architecture as Indifferent Object and the Crisis of Critical Attention"—Tafuri scathingly attacks the anti-historicist modernists who did not see their own historical setting: "The problem with assessing contemporary architecture historically comes from its initial choice: presenting itself as a radically *anti-historical* phenomenon."²⁷ The conclusion to which Tafuri comes at the end of Chapter Two is the modern failure of both architect and critic.

For the modernist architect, "[t]he same work that reveals the unsolved relationship tying its anti-historic origin to a present that no longer justifies that very anti-

²³ James S. Ackerman, "In Memoriam," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 53 (June 1994): 138.

²⁴ Tafuri, *Theories*, 3

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 48. Tafuri had a high opinion of Le Corbusier—in his early writings, praising such projects as Corbusier's plan for Algiers that was aimed at bettering the modern condition in a way that promised to overcome the constraints of the economic structure. Later, however, he represented Le Corbusier's work at Chandigarh as abandoning the utopian effort in favor of a more allusive symbolization of community.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

historicism, uses the metalanguage of criticism, announcing loudly the crisis of the tradition that allows it to exist as a new symbolic object. As such, it has to remain a readable diagram of an intolerable situation."²⁸

For the modernist critic, "[i]nvolved and rejected at the same time, he takes part in the drama performed by architecture. . . . [T]he critic . . . is nothing but a privileged observer. . . . [F]rom the position of committed collaborator he is pushed into the front row to witness, as a silent accomplice, the show offered by an architecture continuously splitting itself in an exhausting mirror game."²⁹

In the Third Chapter of *Theories and History of Architecture*, "Architecture as Metalanguage: the Critical Value of the Image," Tafuri lays the groundwork for his constant dismissal of postmodern architecture. The modernists believed that they had reached the ultimate of history by building curtain-walled boxes; the postmodernists reduce history to fashion.³⁰ To live in the world of postmodernism is to live in a world of constant anxiety: postmodern architects suddenly felt the need to bring symbolism into their work: "History has been reduced to fashion and is understood in the way Walt Disney understands it—Venturi, who thinks he is being ironic, actually ends up more like Mickey Mouse."³¹

²⁸ Ibid., 97

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ackerman, "In Memoriam," 137.

³¹ Manfredo Tafuri, "There is No Criticism, Only History," Richard Ingersoll interviews Manfredo Tafuri, *Casabella* 59 (January/February 1995): 99.

In postmodern architecture, ancient fragments are inserted—like ready-made objects—in ideal spaces realized through elastic perspective deformations: “almost to show, from the inside of those unnatural windows open on to an *autre* universe, the problematics of an existential condition that cannot reject history, but are not yet able to identify its true value . . . the *pastiches* destroy rather than reinforce the historical value of the ancient ‘things’ inserted in the new contexts.” And so, Tafuri concludes, “[h]istory, like nature, is no longer a one-dimensional value: history may contradict the present, may put in doubt, may impose, with its complexity and variety, a choice to be motivated each successive time . . . to restore by plunging into history, by getting involved with it and soiled by it.”³²

Tafuri condemns contemporary architectural theorists’ writings as “operational criticism:” the majority are practicing architects, and, as such, approached past and present through their agendas as practitioners and design theorists.³³ Such a view would lead him at times to deny his own discipline: “There is no such thing as criticism,” he told an interviewer, “there is only history.”³⁴

But more often, he made a call for a higher, more historically informed criticism of “analytical rigor,”³⁵ the “criticism of ideologies.”³⁶ The architects who actually design buildings and imagine that in their buildings they are capable of criticizing architecture have failed to grasp the fact that architecture and the criticism of architecture exist on dif-

³² Tafuri, *Theories*, 20.

³³ See Ackerman, “In Memoriam,” 137.

³⁴ Tafuri, “There is No Criticism. Only History,” 97.

³⁵ Tafuri, *Theories*, 153.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 163.

ferent historical levels, follow different historical trajectories, and serve different historical purposes.

For the architect, the result of realizing this is dismal:

Bound to “build”—because by definition the architect cannot just give voice to his protest, dissent or nausea—but with no trust in the structures that condition their planning, in the society that will use their architecture, in the independence of their specific instruments, those architects who are more aware find themselves in an ambiguous, contorted, almost ridiculous situation. If they try to follow their (rare) eversive impulses through to the end they are shocked at having to decree, as the only possibilities, either the death of architecture or refuge in utopia. If they take the road to self-critical experimentalism, they are bound, in the best of cases, to produce pathetic “monuments,” isolated and extraneous to urban reality.³⁷

And for the critic, the situation is little better:

In a certain sense, this type of historiographical criticism is waiting to be contested and left behind by historical reality. Since it places present praxis before its objective responsibilities historical reality cannot help judging, after the systems of values have been identified, that the various contrasting tendencies refer to the concrete response of the adopted instruments to the intended goals. But it must also be ready to take as a real datum the contradiction of history and its sudden jumps towards the unforeseen.³⁸

But the condition of history—which is, for a Marxist, finally economic history—as manifest in both architecture and criticism forces us to accept our situation. The true and helpful critic must recognize that architecture is “a discipline historically conditioned and institutionally functional to, first, the ‘progress’ of the pre-capitalist bourgeoisie and, later, to the new perspectives of capitalist ‘Zivilization.’” For the critic, this is “the only purpose with any historical sense.”³⁹

After the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, it is hard to give even such softer forms of communism as Tafuri’s Italian neo-Marxism much serious consideration. Tafuri’s

³⁷ Ibid., 235.

³⁸ Ibid., 234.

³⁹ Ibid., 236.

work remains an ideological analysis of the ideological program of architects, not a systematic reading of their actual buildings, and he does not in fact undertake in *Theories and History of Architecture* the concrete, narrow analysis of buildings that he himself proposes.

Neither does Tafuri have much to say about historic preservation in particular. But his scholarship, as Ackerman notes, had “a vitality and conviction lacking in the positivist history in German scholarship and emulated in America, and it opened the way to exciting new visions of architectural intention. . . . Our discipline has remained basically positivist and reluctant to engage in deep interpretation, which makes it irrelevant in a larger cultural context.”⁴⁰

And historic preservation seems capable of gaining, from Tafuri’s work in the theory of the history of architecture, the unified theory it currently lacks. “Distance is fundamental to history,” claims Tafuri, and “The way for us to gain distance from our own times, and thus perspective, is to confront its differences from the past.”⁴¹ Historic preservation becomes the means to illustrate and teach the economic truth behind the myth of progress, and architecture is preserved for its liberating power.

Apart even from the usual complaints one should register against the reductionism of a Marxist analysis—to say nothing of the moral complaints one should register against a totalitarian system—Tafuri lacks a psychology, a philosophical anthropology, sufficient for explaining why humans have the desire to preserve. The system can report the fact as a historical phenomenon and exploit it for revolutionary gain. But it cannot explain the

⁴⁰ Ackerman, “In Memoriam,” 138.

⁴¹ Tafuri, “There is No Criticism. Only History,” 97.

ethical cause, and consequently is incapable of providing the criteria for determining good preservation from bad.

Christine Boyer

Christine Boyer's *The City of Collective Memory*, published in 1994, gives us an understanding of the contemporary city and its sources. Initially intended as a critique of the current-day practices of historic preservation, urban design, and postmodern architecture, "instigated by their unacknowledged complicity with real estate forces and government economic development policies focusing on redeveloping the centers of American and European cities during the 1970s and 1980s,"⁴² the book soon evolved into an exploration of how nineteenth-century images have been translated into contemporary views of the city and how restoration has forged a confused layering of architectural sites.

Though Boyer wanders in her analysis at times back as far as ancient Athens, she is primarily concerned with the modern city, and the overriding device by which she organizes her discussion in *The City of Collective Memory* is a division of modern urban history into three eras: the "City as a Work of Art," the "City as Panorama," and the "City as Spectacle."

The City as a Work of Art is the traditional city, illustrated by Boyer in Second Empire Paris, where architects and planners worked "to secure the turbulent present by tying it to the great artistic inheritance of the past, and mirroring through stylistic references the security and traditional order of pre-industrial and pre-revolutionary times."⁴³

⁴² Christine Boyer, *The City of Collective Memory: Its Historical Imagery and Architectural Entertainments* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), i.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 59.

The designers of the modern industrial city before the end of the nineteenth century were “absorbed with picture making.” It is the “picture frame” that “defined narrative space,” for “there was an urban story to be told within its bounded frame.”⁴⁴

The City as Panorama is the modernist and functional city of Le Corbusier, the city of the “machine aesthetic, the speed of automobile travel,”⁴⁵ which breaks away from any historical reference and thus all memory of the past. A twentieth-century phenomenon, it is “the city of soaring skyscrapers and metropolitan extension.”⁴⁶

And the City as Spectacle is the contemporary city, characterized by electronic communication, by computer-simulated visual environments, by odd and paradoxical juxtapositions, by preserved fragments of the past, and, everywhere, saturated with an array of images. It is the city since the electronic revolution, which began in 1980, “decomposed the bits and pieces of the city into an ephemeral form.”⁴⁷

If Boyer’s earlier book, *Dreaming the Rational City*, was “offered in the spirit of Michel Foucault,”⁴⁸ *The City of Collective Memory* seems born of a reading of Walter Benjamin, who appears as a touchstone throughout the book: “Can we, like Walter Benjamin before us, recall, reexamine, and recontextualize memory images from the past until they awaken within us a new path to the future?”⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 33

⁴⁵ Ibid., 61.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁸ Christine Boyer, *Dreaming the Rational City: The Myth of American City Planning* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983), xii.

⁴⁹ Boyer, *City of Collective Memory*, 29.

After two chapters of introduction, Boyer takes up in four chapters four case studies of the modern city. In “The City and the Theater,” she traces simultaneously the history of theater building with the history of the city. Analyzing the city as a theatrical presentation—its markets, buildings, and meeting places loci for visual drama to be observed—she shows the startling parallel in development: as theaters grew more and more elaborate stages, distancing the spectator from the players, so the city grew into a more and more elaborate theater, distancing itself from its citizens. “The classical theater compelled the spectator to take part in a dialogue. . . . In the contemporary city of spectacle, all that remains of the drama of architecture and the city is pure visual form. We no longer question the performance.”⁵⁰

In “The Art of Collective Memory,” she performs a similar analysis, tracing startling parallel between the rise of museums and the rise of the museum-like city. Preservationists are as much to blame as developers for creating the curator-less museum-city. “Ripping fragments of buildings or artifacts from their original contexts and then collecting and preserving them in nineteenth-century museums is not that distinct an act from attempts to transform our present-day cities into outdoor museums whose architectural streetscapes and spacial stratas become privileged landscapes to explore in pleasure or dismay.”⁵¹

Yet again, in “Topographical Travelogues and City Views,” she traces the parallels in the rise of new techniques for mapping and the rise of the city as a mapped panorama. “Because maps are visual apparatuses through which we view or describe the world

⁵⁰ Ibid., 75.

⁵¹ Ibid., 131.

and are essential instruments of travel. we can begin to explore this mixture of real and fictitious imagery as it relates to our visual memory of cities.”⁵²

And in her final case study, “Invented Traditions and Cityscapes,” she takes up the strange behavior of cities and city planners who—in response to the parallels between cities and theaters, museums, and maps—begin to organize and reform their cities the better to meet viewers’ expectations of finding the city to be a theater, museum, and map.

This forms the theme of her two subsequent chapters criticizing the contemporary city. In “The Instruments of Memory,” she launches a sharp attack on the historic preservationists who are at least in part responsible for urban fictitiousness. “[C]ertain pockets of the city have been preserved or redesigned intentionally as narrative tableaux utilizing imaginary architectures and historical allusions. Yet viewing history as a series of narrative representations necessarily implies that ‘history’ will be rewritten and realigned for specific concerns”—where the present purposes of these “historical phenomena portrayed as ‘heritage’” is the city sold as tourist trap.⁵³

In “Manhattan Montage,” she examines Manhattan’s South Street Seaport and Battery City Park. In the growth of Wall Street’s financial district, a deal was reached between real-estate developers and the South Street Seaport Museum, which controlled a large parcel of land: low buildings would be allowed, small retailers, and a “historic” feel developed. But larger development quickly began to intrude on the area. “A sign on the South Street Seaport claims that ‘The Museum is around you’ in the restored mercantile architecture, in the tall ships docked at its slips, in the morphological plan and names of

⁵² Ibid., 206.

⁵³ Ibid., 369.

its streets.”⁵⁴ Writes Boyer, “[i]t is here in South Street Seaport that present-day realities and nostalgic desires collide, for there is nothing ‘natural’ about the uneven development of urban America that the market actually sustains.”⁵⁵ The ninety-three acres of landfill in Battery City Park were intended to be a mini-city within Manhattan—each of its features modeled after the city’s best other residential areas. But its very falseness makes it less livable than might be supposed, and cannot prevent the city from intruding.



Fig. 15. Christine Boyer's criticism of history rewritten can perhaps be illustrated in Colonial Williamsburg, where the portrayal of heritage is the city sold as tourist trap.

For Boyer, the city is ultimately the collective expression of architecture, a layering of past and present. Even in Second Empire Paris, architects and planners worked “to secure the turbulent present by tying it to the great artistic inheritance of the past, and mir-

⁵⁴ Ibid., 441.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 449.

roring through stylistic references the security and traditional order of pre-industrial and pre-revolutionary times.”⁵⁶

But the contemporary city, in the hands of the conscious or unconscious postmodernists, has moved far deeper into fictitiousness. If modernism was a break with the past, then the contemporary postmodern city, by returning to the traditions ignored in modernity and reevaluating history, has crushed any redeeming sense of tradition. She critiques the postmodern ambiguities in the practice of architecture, city planning, and historic preservation:

[T]hese arts still carry within their visual imaginations the influence of nineteenth-century procedures and representational views of city building. Perhaps unconsciously, often explicitly, they reach back to manipulate architectural fragments and traces formulated as expressions of nineteenth-century problems and needs, but then they insert these fragments into contemporary contexts that are controlled by vastly changed circumstances and desires. Engulfed and enframed by a set of new constraints forged in contemporary times, these fragments from the past appear denigrated by nostalgic sentiments that fuel their preservation or reconstruction, while our collective memory of public spaces seems undermined by historicist reconstruction. When juxtaposed against the contemporary city of disruption and disarray, the detached appearance of these historically detailed compositions becomes even more exaggerated and attenuated.⁵⁷

The “collisions of montage effect” of the contemporary city, for Boyer, is in part a reaction against the functional rigidity of the modernist city. The contemporary city is a assemblage of traditional and modernist, which manipulates “space and time, traveling nostalgically backward through historic reconstructions, projecting our vision forward in futuristic travel adventures.”⁵⁸ Although Boyer admires some of the features of the contemporary city, she nevertheless dislikes being manipulated to feel some official version of history:

⁵⁶ Ibid., 59.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 1-2.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 48.

As being 'modern' in the early part of the twentieth century meant . . . being self-consciously new, blowing up the continuum of tradition, and breaking with the past, the contemporary arts of city building, by returning to traditions established in the nineteenth century, explicitly jump over the city of modernism, hoping to drive that representational order out of their sight. In a conscious attempt to eradicate modernism's oppositional or critical stance that aimed to disrupt the hierarchical authority and official heritage that the nineteenth century bourgeoisie succored within their own set of historicizations and eclectic views, contemporary reevaluations of 'history' have crushed any redeeming sense of traditions. By now, traditions have been so thoroughly 'invented' or homogenized, and 'history' so absolutely marketed or commodified, misrepresented, or rendered invisible, that any oppositional potential rooted in collective memory has been eclipsed completely.⁵⁹

The City as Spectacle is the city that is of most concern for preservationists. Boyer states that if the modernist city, the City of Panorama, was an anomaly, then the City of Spectacle was supposedly the natural inheritor of traditions originally displayed in the City as a Work of Art. Such an argument, however, is intended to eradicate awareness of the social programs and utopian ideals embedded within the modernist view. By making an allegiance with nineteenth-century representational forms, the contemporary postmodern position denies that artists and architects can change the world.⁶⁰

Production and consumption have saturated the City of Spectacle with multiple images. The failure of postmodernism is that it spawns historical amnesia and false reconciliations: "It does not allow for critical perspectives grounded in values formed outside of the marketplace, beyond the grip of the image, in opposition to the aestheticization of everyday life."⁶¹

⁵⁹ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁶¹ Ibid., 65.

The contextualism of the postmodernists and historic preservationists is marked by disunity: it is a "matrix of historically referential places that has been instrumentally imposed on the surface of the city by the developer, the planner, the preservationist, or urban designer; it is the web of space that defines the city as an array of well-defined or historically preserved places. But this array entraps and inhibits our desire to explore what resides outside of the grid, or to understand what must be done to obtain an open and just society."⁶²

This confused layering of past and present has led to a kind of "memory crises." Boyer criticizes the postmodern inclination toward "discontinuities and ruptures, difference and otherness," which have "caused any sense of collectivity to disappear."⁶³ Although the city constantly evolves, either deformed or forgotten, adapted to other purposes or eradicated by different needs, it is only by "recontextualizing memory images from the past until they awaken within a new path to the future," that we can make the city around us more than an open air museum of memories.⁶⁴

At first blush, it seems peculiar that Boyer's critique of the role of preservationists and postmodernists in *The City of Collective Memory* should be thought to offer grounds for a peculiarly postmodern theory of historic preservation. But in the final analysis, it is not so peculiar. Postmodernism is always ambivalent about whether it is describing the way things ought to be or merely the way they happen to be. And Boyer provides the

⁶² Ibid., 11.

⁶³ Ibid., 480.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 29.

wherewithal to explain how the postmodern is historically inevitable. Even while she bemoans it, she accepts it.

For working preservationists, this becomes a justification for the contemporary practice of piecemeal preservation of the city. Her desire for “collectivism” is more a hope than an answer, a left-leaning political attitude rather than a coherent theory of historic preservation. And though it may provide the feeling of ethical procedure for preservation, it does not provide the middle-ground theory we need for distinguishing in particular good preservations from bad.

Conclusion

The logic of change is harsh but certain, for every change has three facets: creation (the new thing that appears), preservation (the elements of the old thing that endure), and destruction (the elements of the old thing that are lost forever). There are occasions when the loss of a building’s spirit would constitute so terrible a destruction that we ban any change. It is hard to say exactly what constitutes the difference—but the fact of the difference is certain: the idea of a restaurant in the Pyramids is ludicrous; the idea of a shopping mall on the Acropolis is outrageous.

As we shall see in Chapter Five, it has something to do with the beauty of a place (and all that beauty implies), for the spirit of beauty is too delicate to survive much change. So too it has something to do with the antiquity of a place, for buildings gain a strange presumption for continued existence merely by virtue of their age. It even has something to do with the uniqueness with which the spirit of a particular building enfigures and instances a particular moment in time.

But—again as we shall note in Chapter Five—it has most to do with a universal necessity for relation with the past, and it is from not confronting the philosophical roots of this fact that the recent attempts to provide a workable *middle-ground* theory of preservation have failed. Lowenthal’s ultimately emotivist account cannot persuade those who do not already agree with his taste. Tafuri, in observing only economic motivations, provides a reductionist account that cannot speak to the root ethical purpose in preservation or provide the criteria for determining good preservation from bad. And Boyer’s work ends at last in affirming the postmodernism it dislikes, her “collectivism” a Romantic trope that cannot provide the middle-ground theory we need.

Before turning to a philosophical account of this “middle ground” in Chapter Five, however, it will be helpful to have before us a particular case study. Chapter Four presents the details of a real-life, complicated, and perhaps not resolvable middle-ground preservation project: the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle at Yale University.

The Sterling Divinity Quadrangle

The story of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, as *New York Times* architectural critic Paul Goldberger puts it, “is a story about the power of institutions and the meaning of buildings—or perhaps about the meaning of institutions and the power of buildings.”¹

When Yale was founded in 1701, one of its main missions was educating the clergy. Nearly three hundred years later, spiritual pursuits have nearly completely lost out to secular: while the law school, medical school, and the school of management thrive, the divinity school struggles to maintain a distinguished reputation: a curriculum perceived as outdated, internal dissent, and a high acceptance rate (at one point, the school was accepting more than eighty percent of its applicants) are a few of its current woes.² But the problem that has been the greatest source of agitation is its deteriorating facilities in the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle.

Built by Delano & Aldrich in 1932, the neo-Georgian Sterling Divinity Quadrangle is a roughly symmetrical, H-shaped cluster of adjoining buildings constructed with handmade, water-struck brick. The complex—built with funds provided by the trustees of the estate of John W. Sterling—contains a chapel, eight pavilions, two guest lodges,

¹ Paul Goldberger, “Saving a Beloved Chapel by Cutting Out Its Soul,” *New York Times*, 22 December 1996, sect. H, 49.

² See Jennifer Kaylin, “New Directions for Divinity?,” *Yale Alumni Magazine* 54 (October 1990): 62.

classroom and administration facilities, library facilities, a dining hall, a common room, and the Institute of Sacred Music building.



Fig. 16. Yale University's Sterling Divinity Quadrangle: not just a poor copy of Thomas Jefferson's University of Virginia.

The main axis of the complex runs north and south, with Marquand Chapel located at the center. The eight pavilions—used as dormitory space and study area—are connected by gable-roof colonnaded walkways and are arranged symmetrically, facing each other across the quadrangle: Hopkins, Brainerd, Seabury, and Beecher on the north side; Stuart, Taylor, Bacon, and Bushnell on the south. (These housing units were named for distinguished ministers, theologians, and missionaries who were graduates of Yale.) The Institute of Sacred Music has rooms, offices, and a library in the southeast corner; and the dining hall and common room are housed in the northeast corner. The Trowbridge and Mission Day libraries are located to the south, and administrative offices are located on the north side of the complex. The boiler room, garage, and mechanical storage rooms

are in the southeast section of the basement; and the faculty lounge, kitchen, bathrooms, and storage rooms are located in the northeast section.

Additional facilities, part of a gift donated for the residential expansion of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, sit to the northeast of the quadrangle. Designed by the office of Douglas Orr in 1957, these facilities include three apartment buildings (Bellamy, Curtis, and Fisher halls), one dormitory building (Taylor Hall), and a Dean's House. The Dean's House is executed in a modified Georgian Revival manner using brick with white trim, and the four halls are brick utilitarian buildings with minimal ornament, executed in the simple manner that was in vogue two decades following World War II. The quadrangle encompasses 165,000 square feet of space, with the five additional buildings adding 116,000, bringing the total divinity school complex to 281,000 gross square feet.

Located at 409 Prospect Street, approximately one mile from Yale's central campus, the quadrangle is patterned after Thomas Jefferson's eighteenth-century plan for the University of Virginia. Several universities around the country have used the University of Virginia master plan: Rice, Emory, Southern Methodist, Delaware, Rochester, Duke, Harvard, Maryland, and Berkeley. But Delano & Aldrich did not merely copy Jefferson's plan, and it is their variation that sets Sterling apart from other Jeffersonian-inspired campuses. It is "the unique features," claims John W. Cook, "that turn it into so extraordinary a place."³

³ John W. Cook, *Building Divinity: the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle at Yale Divinity School* (New Haven: Institute for Sacred Music, 1994), 11.

While the University of Virginia has the library—a Neo-classical variation of the Pantheon in Rome—as its central focus, Yale’s divinity school rightly has its chapel. But it has more besides. As Goldberger describes it:

Jefferson’s campus had no real back; everything opened up to the view of the Blue Ridge Mountains, and what lay behind the Rotunda, as the library was called, mattered not at all. But Delano & Aldrich kept going, showing us that in their minds Jefferson’s model was only the beginning. For the divinity quadrangle opens up to a forecourt before the chapel and then contains a spatially intricate two-part quadrangle behind the chapel, defined by sumptuous Georgian brick buildings that contain the major public spaces of the school. It is at this point, where the complex moves behind the chapel, that it falls over the crest of the hill and the site begins to slope downward. The architects turned this into an impressive spatial drama, designing stairs covered by brick vaults beside the chapel and a formal stair from below the complex into this lower quadrangle. That stair makes the entrance from the rear nearly as powerful an exercise in ordered grandeur as the complex’s front, the classic Jeffersonian view.⁴

These back buildings are the locus of a preservation battle. Yale officials claim the divinity school’s buildings are in poor shape and underused, and the cost of renovating and maintaining the entire quadrangle is too expensive—troubles to be met by demolishing the back buildings that no one sees. Students and alumni who disagree entered a lawsuit to stop the demolition—arguing that “the gifts should have been enough to fund maintenance and renovations had Yale handled their funds wisely.”⁵

In the 1970s, Yale began a policy of deferring maintenance on its physical facilities. By the early 1990s, Frank Turner, then provost of the university, wrote of the problem, “[t]he decay of our buildings is an unhappy fact of life in every area of campus. For the past twenty to thirty years, Yale has supported its academic program by making an

⁴ Goldberger, “Saving a Beloved Chapel.”

⁵ Erin White, “More Join Crusades to Keep Div Quad,” *Yale Daily News*, 15 January 1997.

inadequate investment in its physical structures.”⁶ The deferred maintenance took a toll on the divinity school complex: the paint peeled, the wood trim on the façades rotted, and the tower of Marquand Chapel had to be surrounded with scaffolding after a column beneath the cupola slid off its pedestal.⁷ Even the roofs are weak: according to Bruce Fellman, there was a standing order to evacuate the top floors should more than six inches of snow accumulate on certain roofs.⁸



Fig. 17. Detail of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle: John Ruskin's pleasing decay is no longer very pleasing in the twentieth century.

⁶ Frank Turner, "A Leaner Machine," *Yale Alumni Magazine* 55 (March 1991): 35.

⁷ See Gustav Niebuhr, "Yale Divinity Tries to Find Its Place in the Future," *New York Times*, 17 June 1996, sect. A, 10.

⁸ Bruce Fellman, "The Future of Divinity," *Yale Alumni Magazine* 59 (March 1996): 37.

In September 1994, Yale Provost Alison Richard appointed a Divinity School Review Committee, composed of faculty and administrators, to assess the long-term needs of the Yale Divinity School. The Review Committee studied the school's extensive problems—from its outdated curriculum and high acceptance rate to its deteriorating facilities—and submitted a final report a little over a year later, in October 1995.

The Review Committee recommended downsizing the faculty and student body and implementing minor curriculum changes; most important, they also recommended that the school remain at the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle—urging that renovation be undertaken on the quadrangle and that “peripheral buildings not be fully renovated at this time.”⁹ In December 1995, Provost Richard informed divinity school faculty members she had accepted all the proposals of the Review Committee, save for those concerning the school's deteriorating facilities.¹⁰ “The matter to which I couldn't give a definite reply is the location of the school. It's a complex issue,” she explained.¹¹

In November 1995, one month after the submission of the Review Committee's report, the provost retained the Stillwater Consulting Group, an outside firm that specializes in nonprofit and higher education financial analysis, to assess the financial implications of programmatic changes and facilities renovations recommended in the Review Committee's report. Stillwater presented their final report to Yale in January 1996. In this report, Stillwater concluded that relocating the school to “a newly constructed building

⁹ Divinity School Review Committee, Final Report, 30 October 1995, vol. I, 8.

¹⁰ See Yen Cheong, “Will Yale Demolish Quad?,” *Yale Daily News*, 1 February 1996.

¹¹ Alison Richard, quoted in Yen Cheong, “Divinity to Make Massive Changes,” *Yale Daily News*, 13 December 1995.

near the center of campus . . . has clear financial advantages.”¹² (Stillwater also noted that “[a]s consultants, we are not in a position to decide whether the obvious financial advantage . . . should prevail.”)¹³

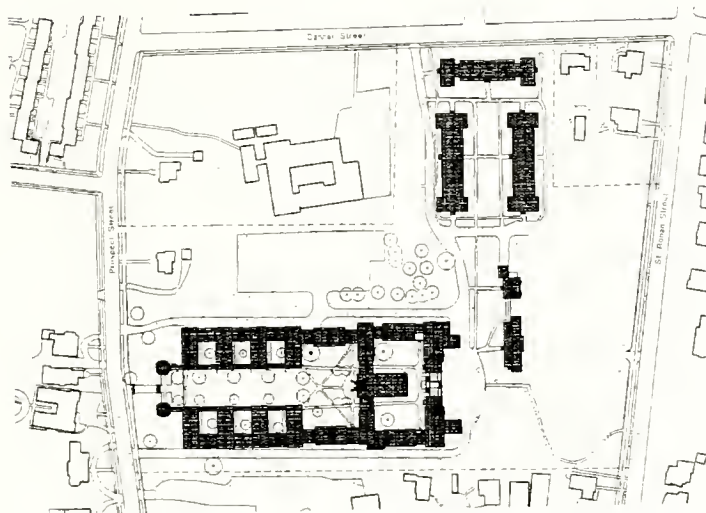


Fig. 18. Existing site plan of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle and annex buildings.

In February 1996, without consulting divinity school officials, the provost formed the Divinity School Working Group, which submitted its final report in May 1996. That report concluded that the high cost of restoring the school—now estimated at \$45 million—was too high. “We kept finding that all present and future resources of the Divinity School would be entailed to bricks and mortar,” said committee chairman Peter Brooks. “We felt that the campus was going to be more and more of a financial albatross, and that a slightly smaller and intellectually intense Divinity School would benefit from being less

¹² Stillwater Consulting Group, Final Report, 29 January 1996, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

isolated.”¹⁴ A new building of 90,000 square feet was proposed, costing \$28.5 million.¹⁵ And rumors swirled that Yale was ready to demolish the Sterling complex and move the divinity school to smaller, newer facilities downtown. As renowned architectural historian and Yale professor Vincent Scully put it, “[i]f an institution dwindles and it happens to be in a great building, they can destroy the building.”¹⁶

In September 1996, however, the Reverend Richard Wood became the new dean of the divinity school and promptly formed a Steering Committee, composed of members of both the Review Committee and the Working Group, to examine options for the divinity school to remain at the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle.¹⁷ Concurrently, University Planning hired the New York-based R. M. Kliment & Frances Halsband Architects, “a firm with extensive experience of adaptive reuse of university facilities,” to do a feasibility study.¹⁸ Kliment & Halsband completed their study in February 1997 and proposed three options: a preservation scheme for reusing the entire complex of academic and residential buildings; a new building scheme for demolishing and replacing the academic buildings; and an “adaptive reuse” scheme.¹⁹

Yale opted for the third scheme, claiming that “[t]he proposed complex of buildings is well matched to the substance and spirit of the program, and to the academic and

¹⁴ Peter Brooks, quoted in “A New Report Ponders Moving Divinity,” *Yale Alumni Magazine* 60 (October 1996): 16.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Vincent Scully, quoted in Philip Langdon, “A Pattern of Destruction,” *Preservation* 49 (March/April 1997): 14.

¹⁷ See Yen Cheong, “Just in Time for Changes, Div School Gets New Dean,” *Yale Daily News*, 27 March 1996.

¹⁸ R. M. Kliment & Frances Halsband Architects, *Yale Divinity School Feasibility Study*, February 1997, 3.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-46.

social mission of the School.”²⁰ In the proposed scheme, the quadrangle buildings will be gutted and rebuilt, leaving their façades intact but altering the arrangement of the space inside. The buildings to the rear of the quadrangle, which now house the dining hall, the common room, and the Institute of Sacred Music, will be demolished, opening the complex to the east and reducing the campus to about 113,000 square feet. The completed project was estimated to cost \$32 million,²¹ and constituted “an optimal solution,” according to Yale President Richard C. Levin: “It will preserve the Delano and Aldrich design [and] it will be a facility that we can afford to maintain, a standard we must impose if we are to avoid the path of neglect chosen by our predecessors.”²²

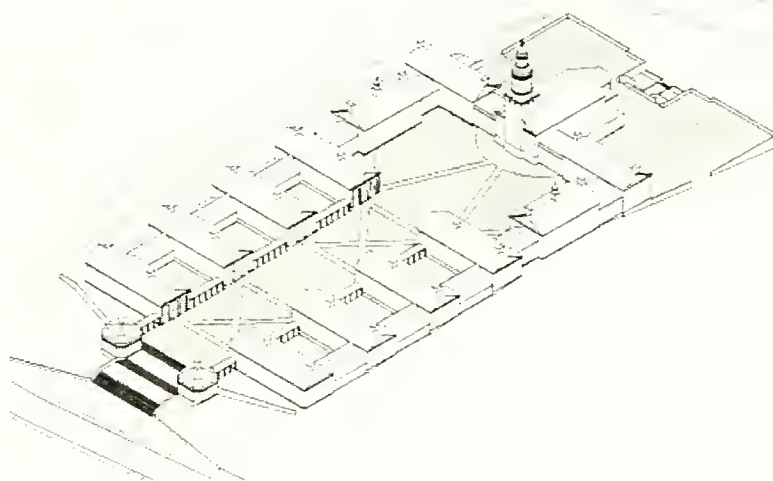


Fig. 19. Kliment & Halsband's axonometric of the recommended scheme, in which buildings to the east of the chapel are demolished.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Richard C. Levin, “A Message to Yale Divinity School Graduates From President Richard C. Levin,” *Spectrum* 17 (Spring 1997): 2.

Protest Against the Proposed Scheme

Objections to the proposed demolition of the back third of the quadrangle quickly surfaced. Calling the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle “a masterpiece of American architecture,” Vincent Scully, in a letter to Yale President Richard Levin, said that demolition of the Sterling Quadrangle would be tantamount to destroying the whole thing.²³ “Yale has always had a narrowly utilitarian and careless attitude toward its buildings,” he wrote, “and I get the very strong feeling that your administration, whatever its public statements may be, has in fact marked those magnificent buildings for destruction.”²⁴ The back buildings, argued Scully, “deal gracefully with a situation which Jefferson does not even attempt to resolve at the University of Virginia: what to do with the back of the main building and the hill slope beyond it.”²⁵

Architectural critic Paul Goldberger also expressed his opinion about the proposed demolition: “Like the village that had to be destroyed to be saved, the divinity school is being ‘saved’ by having a whole chunk of its essence ripped apart.”²⁶ Mocking a university that “assumes that what matters in architecture is only the front,” Goldberger believes that the quadrangle is more “than a poor copy of Jefferson’s University of Virginia.”²⁷

“[T]hese buildings are superb examples of twentieth century architecture which inventively adapt earlier forms to new purposes,” added architect Robert Stern, director of Columbia University’s program in historic preservation.²⁸ (Stern did praise the university

²³ Vincent Scully, “Letter to the Editor,” *Yale Daily News*, 28 January 1997.

²⁴ Vincent Scully, personal letter to Yale President Richard Levin, 7 October 1996.

²⁵ Scully, “Letter to the Editor.”

²⁶ Goldberger, “Saving a Beloved Chapel.”

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Robert Stern, personal letter to Yale President Richard Levin, 10 October 1996.

for agreeing to save most of the buildings in the complex, but felt that new uses should be found for the rest of the buildings.)²⁹

Preservationists have an ambivalent attitude toward Yale. Stern lauded the university for its preservation of the Old Campus and Sterling Memorial Library. But he also voiced the concern of Prospect Hill residents that the divinity school site not become like the nearby Davies Mansion: “an embarrassment to all of us who value the university as an enlightened force.”³⁰ The run-down, boarded-up mansion has remained vacant since Yale bought it from the Culinary Institute of America for \$1.2 million in 1972.³¹ Scully also expressed concern lest the quadrangle become like the Davies Mansion, stating that the university’s “narrowly utilitarian attitude toward its buildings . . . leads Yale to truly sordid behavior, like its calculated demolition by neglect of the Davies House.”³²

Local and national preservation groups have written to President Levin, expressing their concern about the divinity school: Richard Moe, President of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, strongly opposed “any plan that calls for the demolition of National Register buildings and the undermining of the Divinity School’s historic character.”³³ In their 1995 Preservation Year in Review for the northeast region, the National

²⁹ See Ned Cramer, “Divine Intervention,” *Architecture* 86 (April 1997): 32.

³⁰ Stern, letter to Levin.

³¹ Patrick Dilger, “Yale Urged Not to Demolish Divinity School,” *New Haven Register*, 18 October 1996.

³² Vincent Scully, quoted in Erin White, “Scully Lambasts Administrators’ Proposals to Raze Div School,” *Yale Daily News*, 16 October 1996.

³³ Richard Moe, personal letter to Yale President Richard Levin, 13 November 1996.

Trust included the quadrangle under their list of “threatened” buildings.³⁴ John Vincent Boyer, of the Mark Twain House, also wrote to President Levin, stating that the proposed changes “would ruin—both in spirit and in fabric—one of the great collegiate plans of the twentieth century.”³⁵



Fig. 20. The Davies Mansion, expressed by renowned architectural historian Vincent Scully as Yale’s demolition by neglect.

In reply, President Levin said that “[c]areful study has demonstrated that we can best fulfill the mission of the Divinity School and continue to build on its strengths with an adaptive re-use of the present facilities.”³⁶ Yale’s proposed \$30 million reconstruction plan would preserve the most architecturally significant portion of the school: “the front part of the quadrangle which faces Prospect Street and has Marquand Chapel at its

³⁴ See National Trust for Historic Preservation, 1995 Preservation Year in Review, Northeast Region, 2.

³⁵ John Vincent Boyer, personal letter to Yale President Richard Levin, 4 June 1997.

³⁶ Richard C. Levin, quoted in Patrick Dilger, “Reconstruction Plans Threaten Historic Buildings at Yale Divinity School,” *Connecticut Preservation News* 19 (November / December 1996): 1.

apex.”³⁷ Yale plans to combine classrooms and administrative offices in the underused residential space that now occupies the front area.

The Lawsuit: Save the Quad v. Yale

Not content with Yale’s “partial preservation” proposal, a group of Yale University students and alumni filed a lawsuit against the university in December 1996.³⁸ Known as the Foundation for the Preservation of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, this group was formed to demand complete preservation of the quadrangle.

The claimants argue that Yale’s plans violated the original goals of John Sterling’s 1918 bequest: “There should be no financial reason not to renovate,” said attorney John Peck, Jr. “The money should be there, and if it’s not there, we’d like to know why not.”³⁹ According to the plaintiffs, Yale neglected ongoing repairs, despite the presence of a \$500,000 maintenance fund that was set aside for the divinity school in 1935. According to their calculations, that fund would have grown to \$23 million by now with interest and inflation.⁴⁰ Although university officials have said that claims of such a fund’s existence were “questionable,” research in Yale University’s manuscripts and archives does indeed show the establishment of such a fund⁴¹—and the students call “for a declaratory

³⁷ Ibid., 3.

³⁸ See Karla Schuster. “Waiting Period Lengthens in Divinity School Fate,” *New Haven Register*, 8 December 1996.

³⁹ John Peck, Jr., quoted in Isaiah Wilner. “CT Attorney General May Sue Yale Over Divinity School,” *Yale Daily News*, 4 February 1998.

⁴⁰ See Erin White. “Judge Dismisses Suit Over Yale’s Div School Policy,” *Yale Daily News*, 28 April 1997.

⁴¹ Ibid.

judgment that Yale's plans for YDS "constitute an abuse of its discretion as trustee of a public charitable trust."⁴²



Fig. 21. The Sterling Divinity Quadrangle's common room, a meeting place for divinity students, has been slated for demolition.

In reply, Provost Richard declared Yale's stewardship both "entirely appropriate" and legally sound.⁴³ Yale claimed that "[t]he law does not allow these plaintiffs to invoke the extraordinary powers of this Court in their attempt to overrule the action's of Yale's governing body and impose upon Yale their view of how YDS should be run."⁴⁴ Declaring that their opponents "have submitted a complaint that is long on rhetoric and conclusory allegations but woefully devoid of any factual allegations showing any wrongdoing." Yale's lawyers concluded that "[o]ther than the obvious fact that plaintiffs say they do not like what they believe Yale is going to do, they have not articulated any substantive rea-

⁴² *Chester Wickwire v. Yale University* (Superior Court, Judicial District of New Haven), 21 January 1997.

⁴³ See Wilner, "CT Attorney General May Sue."

⁴⁴ *Chester Wickwire v. Yale University*.

son why it would be a breach of any fiduciary duty for Yale to do what it proposes to do.”⁴⁵

Agreeing with the university’s claim that Yale is a public corporation and its actions cannot be challenged by private individuals, a New Haven Superior Court judge dismissed the suit.⁴⁶ But the plaintiffs have vowed to regroup and re-file, and their new filing may have some extra support. Cynthia Russell—one of the last surviving descendants of the man who endowed the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle (and much besides at Yale)—has denounced the slated demolition and pledged to sign on as a plaintiff. And Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal may bring his own suit. (Blumenthal had set precedent during the last legal battle by filing a brief supporting divinity students’ right to sue, but he did not file his own suit, which the consortium of divinity students and alumni needed to gain a hearing.)⁴⁷

Although the intra-campus battle seems over, with Yale’s administration settled upon the partial renovation and partial demolition, the legal battle will continue. With the final outcome yet to be determined, it can be worthwhile to use the case study of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle—an ideal example of a real-life, complicated and not entirely resolvable middle-ground preservation project—upon which to test a theory of historic preservation in Chapter Five.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Wilner, “CT Attorney General May Sue Yale.”

⁴⁷ Ibid.

A Theory of Historic Preservation

The simple fact is that we do historic preservation for no simple reason. Dozens of explanations for our contemporary impulse to preserve are possible—from psychological explanations of the behavior of rats, to economic explanations of the behavior of tourists, to sociological explanations of the modern, alienated “man in the lonely crowd.”

None of these explanations are entirely persuasive, of course, and—more to the point—none of them have in fact persuaded much of the population. Historic preservation is a practice that, despite its generally wide acceptance *as a practice*, somehow lacks a widely accepted reason for doing it.

And this confusion of explanations for our purposes in preserving leads to all sorts of absurdities in actual practice. The status of law concerning preservation makes a particular good example.

In both legislative enactments and judicial case law in America, there seems to be a recognition that it is not things themselves but their contexts that evoke the past. And place, more than anything else, is what gives us the sense of the past we seek in historic preservation. Indeed, Henry James (in the unfinished novel the title of which gave us the phrase “the sense of the past”) declares, “[t]here are particular places where things have

happened, places enclosed and ordered and subject to the continuity of life mostly, that seem to put us into communication” with the past.¹ If we cannot say why a sense of the past is a good thing, the fact that it is good seems certain—and so we have a genuine interest in the preservation of place.

That interest, however, is in very real conflict with other interests. Both as individuals and as a society, we have an interest in maintaining the right to private property. How the courts decide the law is always difficult for laymen to grasp, but the demand for preservation seems to constitute an intrusion on private property.

The Fifth Amendment to the Constitution determines that when a governmental action amounts to a “taking,” the government must pay just compensation to the owner of any private property involved. In historic preservation, a taking can occur, for example, when a local historic district or historical commission restricts the use to which an owner may put his property by denying him the right to demolish, all in the name of the public good.

A “landmarked” gas station provides a case in point: Sandra and Robert Wagenfeld found for sale an 1821, four-story, Federal, brick house that happened to have a derelict 1922 gas station in its back yard. They bought the house anyway, with plans to demolish the deteriorated gas station to make room for a garden. To their surprise, the Wagenfelds were not allowed to tear the station down: the structure was part of the Greenwich Village Historic District, therefore it could not be demolished (even the exte-

¹ Henry James, *Novels and Tales of Henry James* (New York: Scribner's, 1907-1917), vol. 26: *The Sense of the Past*, 48.

riors could not be altered) without permission from the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission.

Members of the commission declared that they might have permitted the demolition of a more ordinary gas station, but this particular gas station “is a marker of the city's history, not hidden away somewhere in a library, but sitting right there on the street. It's a way people can touch base with how the Village came to be—not just a village of writers and artists and radicals, but people like you and me, some of whom had cars and needed a gas station.”² In other words, the gas station had to remain as it was—neglected and deteriorated—or be renovated strictly according to the commission's rules.

The Wagenfelds decided to renovate the building because, as Mrs. Wagenfeld said, “[w]e couldn't leave it an eyesore.”³ But nothing could be done without a “certificate of appropriateness” from the commission; all work had to be approved, down to the shade of the mortar. The Wagenfelds, worried about their privacy and security, wanted to build a partly-solid brick wall separating the station from the street, but the commission ruled that the station had to be more visible to the community. In the end, they compromised on a brick wall interrupted by three seven-by-eight-foot steel openings and protected by an elaborate security system. Two years, countless meetings, and \$100,000 later, the gas station has been preserved.

² Elliot Willensky, quoted in Joyce Purnick, “The Saga of a Landmark Gas Station,” *New York Times*, 1 November 1984, sect. C, 6.

³ Sandra Wagenfeld, *ibid.*, sect. C, 1.

How the Landmarks Preservation Commission deems what is appropriate often seems arbitrary. A townhouse in the same district received its “certificate of appropriateness” even though it was incompatible with the rest of the neighborhood. In this instance, the original house no longer existed: during the Vietnam protest era, explosives—which were being assembled in the house—accidentally detonated. Hugh Hardy, an “inventive preservation architect,” acquired the site and proposed a replacement “that conformed with neighboring buildings in all respects but one: its protruding, second-story bay, which Hardy included as a gesture to the site’s tragic history.”⁴ Neighbors demanded that the commission not approve of Hardy’s “aesthetic incompatibility” with Greenwich Village’s



Fig. 22. A newly constructed townhouse in the Greenwich Village Historic District was given a “certificate of appropriateness,” despite aesthetic incompatibility.

⁴ John J. Costonis, *Icons and Aliens: Law, Aesthetics, and Environmental Change* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 41.

existing architecture, but—afraid to impinge on Hardy’s First Amendment right of freedom of expression—the commission approved of the design.⁵

A “taking” question may also occur when a local government restricts the use to which an owner may put his property by denying the right to alter a historic structure for more lucrative use. In the case of the Boyd Theater of Philadelphia, the state supreme court ruled in 1991 that government regulation of historic buildings was indeed unconstitutional: the Philadelphia Historical Commission, by designating the Boyd Theater as a historic building over the objections of its owners, United Artists, had taken private property for public use without just compensation.

In 1993, however, the court issued a new opinion: it now decided that “such regulation is not only constitutional, but very likely indispensable.”⁶ (The judge who wrote the initial decision—known to be a vehement foe of preservation regulation—did not participate in this ruling: he was charged with illegally obtaining anti-anxiety drugs through court employees.)⁷ The new ruling was based on the argument that preservation law should not extend to the interior of a building. Unfortunately, the historical commission had certified the theater largely based on its interior, but the city’s law gives the commission the power to regulate an interior only in those cases where it might affect the

⁵ See Costonis, *Icons and Aliens*, 40-43.

⁶ Thomas Hine, “A Reversal that Allows Preservation to Proceed,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 14 November 1993, sect. H, 1.

⁷ Emily Lounsberry, “Pa. Court Shifts Gears on Preservation Law,” *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 11 November 1993, sect. A, 14.

exterior. Although the reversal was a victory for preservation law, it was unable to solve the original dilemma of the Boyd Theater's historic designation.



Fig. 23. Philadelphia's Boyd Theater.

But, indeed, that is the nature of law—a necessary effect of trying to use law without something resembling a consensus. The law is incapable of making the sort of distinctions we need if we are to have a policy for preserving historic places, because the law is incapable of distinguishing individual instances and incapable of distinguishing tastes. As John J. Costonis puts it:

Law cannot create beauty anew. More modest and derivative, its charge is to icons, which may or may not be 'beautiful' in some formalistic sense, against marauding aliens, which may or may not be 'ugly' in that same sense. The law's rigid syntax is decidedly ill-fitted to pinpoint design values. Lawmakers must begin by asking whether or not shared community sentiment supports the claim that this or that resource is an icon. . . . It is commu-

nity support that legitimates the decision to confer legal status upon icons in the first place.⁸

We need, in other words, the sort of general societal agreement about what needs preserving and who ought to pay for it that the law cannot give us. And that agreement can only proceed from a clear vision of the good we seek in historic preservation. We may agree that place grants the strongest sense of the past and that this sense is a good thing to have, and thus agree that historic places ought to be preserved. But without an agreement about why the sense of the past is good, we cannot distinguish those places that grant it from those places that do not.

The problem is one of disunity, and proceeding to preserve without consensus is not going to solve the problem—and can even make it worse. In his history of American preservation, James Marston Fitch gives many examples of absurdity: the modest log cabin which is said to have been Abraham Lincoln's birthplace is dwarfed by the grand limestone mausoleum which houses it; the unpolished Plymouth Rock, strangely out of context, is displayed in a cut-stone casing; the "spirit" of the ZCMI Victorian department store in Salt Lake City is said to have been preserved by keeping only its cast-iron and sheet metal façade.⁹

With perhaps equal facility, one can find examples of successful preservation. The saving of Frank Furness's Fine Arts Library at the University of Pennsylvania keeps its red, terra-cotta tile roof and red sandstone walls as visual relief from the university's col-

⁸ John J. Costonis, *Icons and Aliens*, 45.

⁹ See Fitch, *Historic Preservation*, 124-125.

orless Van Pelt Library across the walk.¹⁰ The restoration in Chicago of Burnam and Root's 1888 Rookery Building, at one time considered a lost cause, proves that saving historic buildings on prime commercial land does not have to be economically unviable.¹¹ And the remodeling into an interesting living space of a decrepit, 150-year-old, tin-roofed barn in Vermont proves the possibility of adaptive use: not particularly beautiful, old, or unique, the remodeled barn is a perfect example of a change in which the interesting elements of the old perdure.¹²



Fig. 24. An old, tin-roofed barn adaptively used: a perfect example of a change in which the interesting elements of the old perdure.

¹⁰ See Robert Venturi, "Learning from Philadelphia," *Abitare* 312 (November 1992): 146-152, and Jean Gorman, "A Masterpiece Restored," *Interiors* 151 (January 1992): 94-95

¹¹ See Blair Kamin, "Chicago's Rookery Restored," *Architecture* 81 (July 1992): 28, and Michael Wagner, "Breaking Ground," *Interiors* 149 (November 1989): 130.

¹² See Jill Herbers, *Great Adaptations: New Residential Uses for Older Buildings* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1990, 57-61.

But—as we saw in Chapter One—even successful preservations can lead to absurdity precisely because their justifications are not well considered or widely shared. What is needed is some sorting out. People have a variety of conflicting reasons for preserving, all tangled together like a ball of yarn; what needs to be done is to tease out some of the loose ends: to perform what Nietzsche called a “genealogy” of the field, or, better, what Michel Foucault called an “archaeology of knowledge.”¹³

If we tease out one of the many threads, we see that people seem to have certain sentimental reasons for preservation—sentimental reasons directly traceable to the stream of Romanticism in modernity, from Rousseau’s Noble Savage, through Goethe’s *Sorrows of Young Werther*, and on to the contemporary Romance novel. It is from this thread that there derives the eighteenth-century love of ruins and moralizing about the beautiful, the sublime, and the picturesque. It is from this thread that there derives the Victorian fascination with the Middle Ages—from Tennyson’s Arthurian Romances to Ruskin’s Gothic cathedrals built by “happy Christians,” and on to Henry Adams’s analysis of the influence of the Blessed Virgin Mary at Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres.

The Romantic impulse to seek the past may indeed, as many have argued, be caused by a sense of discontinuity from that past: modernity’s notion of progress toward a future golden age is always matched by a sense of longing for a golden age lost now in the past.¹⁴ The “discontinuity” thesis is often matched with some version of the claim that

¹³ See Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor, 1990), and Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon, 1972).

¹⁴ See J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into Its Origin and Growth* (New York: Dover, 1955).

time moves faster in modernity than it did before—from Henry Adams theory of each age being in length the square root of the previous age, to Alvin Toffler’s “future shock.”¹⁵ But the point is always that modernity had, as its fundamental driving purpose, the destruction of all past values: people feel disconnected from the past because they are.

From time to time, the Romantic impulse to preserve decays to outright lies: the Shah of Iran’s twentieth-century invention of Persepolis¹⁶ and the eighteenth-century forgery of a medieval Scottish epic in *Ossian* are both examples of nationalism’s willingness to invent a Romantic past where it does not exist. Romanticism can equally decay to sheer sentimentality—the confusion of history with nostalgia that creates the Rock and Roll Museum and puts Archie Bunker’s chair in the Smithsonian’s Museum of History and Technology.¹⁷

If we tease out from the tangle of reasons for preservation yet another thread, we get not Romanticism but Rationalism. Once again, the impulse to preserve is born out of a feeling of discontinuity with the past. The difference lies in that instead of romanticizing the past, an attempt was made to rationalize and thus master the past. This would give us the past as it really was, without superstition, legend, or myth. In architecture, rationalists believed that architectural form was essentially structural form: architectural forms

¹⁵ See Henry Adams, *The Degradation of the Democratic Dogma* (New York: Scribner’s, 1920), 308, and Alvin Toffler, *Future Shock* (New York: Random House, 1970).

¹⁶ See E. R. Chamberlin, *Preserving the Past* (London: J. M. Dent, 1979), 18-27.

¹⁷ See John Brinckerhoff Jackson, *The Necessity for Ruins and Other Topics* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1980), 89.

not only required rational justification, but could only be so justified if they derived their laws from science.¹⁸

In the nineteenth century, restorers such as Viollet-le-Duc purged medieval churches in later additions, and in doing so, they believed that they were reconstituting the true past. But in this effort to improve the past, they did not realize that in actuality they were changing the past to their expectations of what the past should be. Today, we can find this rationalistic impulse in the construction of Colonial Williamsburg, with its buildings and building elements from the postcolonial age either demolished or moved. (It is true that in the reconstructed Williamsburg, there were used paints and fabrics brighter—and so more pleasing to our current tastes—than the colonists ever used. But an entirely rationalist justification was offered that the colonists, if only they had such bright colors and fabrics, would surely have used them.)¹⁹

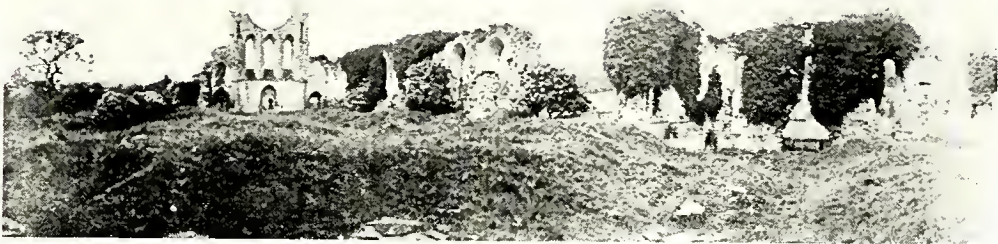
Rationalism too is susceptible to deceit: in Fort Worth an abandoned and decaying downtown stockyard area dating from the 1920s was restored in the style of the 1870s, while in New Mexico a brand new “eighteenth-century” Spanish Colonial village—complete with eighteenth-century harvest festivals and folkdances—hopes to achieve landmark status.²⁰ And as we saw in Chapter One, Rationalism at its most extreme—in, for example, Stalinist Marxism—can issue in an attempt to destroy whatever from the past it could not subsume under its vision of the rational.

¹⁸ See Peter Collins, *Changing Ideals in Modern Architecture, 1750-1950* (London: Faber and Faber, 1965), 198.

¹⁹ See Mitchell Schwarzer, “Myths of Permanence and Transience in the Discourse on Historic Preservation in the United States,” *Journal of Architectural Education* 48 (9 September 1994): 3

²⁰ See Jackson, *Necessity for Ruins*, 90.

But the Rationalistic attempt in scientific history to uncover “the past as it really was” is not so distinct from the Romantic desire to have the past spark our emotions. When the threads of Romanticism and Rationalism get tangled together, such ridiculous results as “tidied ruins” are possible—the attempt to tidy up and thus rationalize the romantic ruins so much admired by the followers of Ruskin. And both threads, together and separately, can appear in tangles: with patriotic and nationalistic attempts to justify the modern nation-state, with postmodern aestheticism, with religious revivalism—and tourism, commercialism, and dozens of other threads besides.



Figs. 25a. and 25b. The Byland Abbey in North Yorkshire: ruins made tidy.

And yet, these threads, once teased out, reveal certain points in common—ethical points that prove worthwhile to develop. We have the postmodern philosophers to thank for the news that modernity was ultimately successful in its attempts to shatter the past—

and that modernity shattered itself at the same time. But if the richness of our lives depends in some way on our connection to the past, then we are in a perilous situation—for postmodernism—as we saw in Chapter Three—gives us no reason to preserve.

But the modernity that the postmodernists invariably have in mind is the intellectual world exemplified by Jean Jacques Rousseau. For the postmodernists, modernity is based on the Rousseauian autonomous self, broken away from the past. And the modern impulse to preserve derives from the two movements that meet in Rousseauian liberalism: Rationalism and Romanticism.

There is, however, another intellectual tradition available to us in modernity, the tradition which owes its clearest expression to Edmund Burke: the tradition of conservatism which emphasizes continuity.

When Rousseau began *The Social Contract* with his famous claim, “[m]an is born free, and is everywhere in chains,” he meant that society is a contract made among the living, which the living can change at will.²¹ The “chains” to which he refers are ultimately the chains of the past, the chains of society that the past has handed down to us.

“Society is indeed a contract,” Burke wrote in answer to Rousseau. But

it is not a partnership in things subservient only to the gross animal existence of a temporary and perishable nature. It is a partnership in all science; a partnership in all art; a partnership in every virtue and in all perfection. As the ends of such a partnership cannot be obtained in many generations, it becomes a partnership not only between those who are living, but between those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are about to be born.²²

²¹ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract*, trans. Maurice Cranston (Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), 1.

²² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1955), 110.

If the continuities of the past are not entirely rational, then Rousseauian modernism has failed, and postmodernism shows us how. But Rousseau does not provide the only possibility of foundational modern thought, and conservatism—appearing in answer to the Rationalistic excesses of the Revolution in France and the Romantic excesses of Napoleonism—was designed primarily to account for those not entirely rational continuities of the past without falling into Romanticism.

Within the Burkean tradition, there are thus derivable answers to the question of why we should preserve. Accepting the ultimately unchangeable nature of human beings, this anti-Rousseauian tradition sees, for instance, a need to assuage the anxiety of death. The temporality of architecture can certainly contribute to modern anxiety. The modern city becomes for T. S. Eliot “the wasteland”—a pastiche of unintelligible shards of history: “These fragments I have shored against my ruins.”²³ But the temporality of architecture can be the source of continuity as well—the source of what Simone Weil called “rootedness.”²⁴ While touring the monastic ruins of Iona, Samuel Johnson declaimed:

Whatever withdraws us from the power of our senses, whatever makes the past, the distant, or the future, predominate over the present, advances us in the dignity of thinking beings. Far from me, and from my friends, be such frigid philosophy as may conduct us indifferent and unmoved over any ground which has been dignified by wisdom, bravery, or virtue. That man is little to be envied, whose patriotism would not gain force upon the plain of Marathon, or whose piety would not grow warmer among the ruins of Iona.²⁵

Temporality, when rooted in place, seems able to assuage some of the anxiety of death by allowing us to experience permanence.

²³ T. S. Eliot, “The Wasteland,” in *Collected Poems* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1970), 69.

²⁴ See Simone Weil, *The Need for Roots*, trans. Arthur Wills (New York: Harper & Row, 1971).

²⁵ Samuel Johnson, quoted by James Boswell, *Johnson’s Journey to the Western Island of Scotland and Boswell’s Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, ed. R. W. Chapman (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 385.

So too the Burkean tradition points to the richness of life maintained only by continuity. In the French Revolution's "empire of light and reason," Edmund Burke complained, "[a]ll the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies" are to be discarded.²⁶ The ticky-tack track housing of suburban America is an example of what an architectural world of a single era would look like; and it is avoidable only with the preservation of the past.



Fig. 26. Modernism working itself out in popular culture: subdivision under construction near Los Angeles, California.

And so too, the Burkean tradition would argue, we have a responsibility to preserve beauty. What beauty is and how it makes us happy are vexed questions. But the impulse that moved, for example, T. S. Eliot from the radicalism of "The Wasteland" to the theological conservatism of the "Four Quartets" is proof of the necessity for a view of beauty that does not depend entirely upon our own present-day tastes.

²⁶ Edmund Burke, *Reflections*, 96.

But finally, the Burkean tradition demands that we observe a duty in the world rather than a Rousseauian freedom—a duty toward “those who are living, those who are dead, and those who are about to be born.” Simply by being old, things make a demand upon us, and that demand increases the older they are—just as the rarity and historical associations of an object that our ancestors left us increases the necessity to preserve it as the continuity, the link, between those now dead and those not yet born.

All of these Burkean themes bear some application to this thesis’s major case study, the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle at Yale University. If Yale had properly maintained the divinity school in the first place, it would not—after only sixty-six years of life—be in such a state of disrepair.

It was Ruskin, interestingly, who foresaw such deferred maintenance and deplored it in very Burkean terms:

The principal of modern times . . . is to neglect buildings first, and restore them afterwards. Take proper care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them. . . . Watch an old building with an anxious care; guard it as best you may, and at *any* cost from every influence of dilapidation. Count its stones as you would jewels of a crown; set watches about it as if at the gates of a besieged city; bind it together with iron where it loosens; stay it with timber where it declines; do not care about the unsightliness of the aid; better a crutch than a lost limb; and do this tenderly, and reverently, and continually, and many a generation will still be born and pass away beneath its shadow. Its evil day must come at last; but let it come declaredly and openly, and let no dishonoring and false substitute deprive it of the funeral offices of memory.²⁷

But the problem now is not what Yale has done in the past, but whether preservationists can justifiably demand that Yale do something in the future. And—as is always the case in what we called in Chapter One the world of “middle-ground” examples—both sides in the dispute have some telling arguments. Yale officials can accurately claim that

²⁷ Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 185-186.

they are in some sense preserving the quadrangle. But there is equal force in Paul Goldberger's observation that "[w]hat is most troubling is how disingenuous it is—how it presents itself as an act of rescue, when it is, in fact, an act of destruction."²⁸

We can argue for the preservation of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle because of its history. Except perhaps for Princeton's, no divinity school is as closely linked to America's history as Yale's. The Foundation for the Preservation of Sterling Divinity Quadrangle argues that the quadrangle is "a distinguished assembly of buildings of significant architectural integrity and historic merit which was specifically designed as the home of the Yale Divinity School. The Quadrangle is particularly and uniquely suited to the School's character and mission."²⁹

And we can argue (with slightly lessened conviction) for preservation of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle because of its beauty. In a *New York Times* article, the religion reporter Gustav Niebuhr (a descendent of two of America's most famous twentieth-century theologians, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, both at times associated with the Yale school) calls it "an architectural gem"; Vincent Scully declares that it is "a masterpiece of American architecture"; Paul Goldberger proclaims that it is a "complex of intricacy, delicacy and serenity of a sort one rarely experiences anywhere in American architecture."³⁰

²⁸ Goldberger, "Saving a Beloved Chapel."

²⁹ The Foundation for the Preservation of Sterling Divinity Quadrangle, Campaign Update II: Campaign for the Preservation of Sterling Divinity, February 1997.

³⁰ Niebuhr, "Yale Divinity Tries to Find Its Place in the Future"; Scully, "Letter to the Editor"; Goldberger, "Saving a Beloved Chapel."

We can also argue (with definitely lessened conviction) for preservation of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle because of its uniqueness. Although based on the University of Virginia prototype, the quadrangle introduced new elements that made it unique—and these are the very elements that Yale proposes to tear down. As Goldberger declares, “[i]t is as if Yale and its architects had decided that, yes, this place really wasn’t anything more than a carbon copy of Jefferson, and just to make sure that no one missed that point, they would tear down everything that showed that Delano & Aldrich had some ideas of their own.”³¹

And, at last, we can argue (with very much lessened conviction) for preservation of the Sterling Divinity Quadrangle because of its age. The quadrangle is certainly not ancient, but American architecture is still a relatively new architecture and this group of buildings were built at a time that would be hard to replace nowadays: as Scully puts it, “the idea of tearing down grand old buildings to build questionable new ones seems irrational at best. The error of economic arguments to justify such acts has been demonstrated repeatedly.”³² Or as Richard Hegel, the municipal historian for New Haven, observes, “[y]ou couldn’t afford to build those buildings today.”³³

Ultimately (to borrow somewhat ironically the words with which William F. Buckley announced in 1955 his reasons for establishing the conservative magazine *National Review*), what preservation is for is “to stand athwart history and yell stop.” Preser-

³¹ Goldberger, “Saving a Beloved Chapel.”

³² Vincent Scully, quoted in Patrick Dilger, “Divinity School Demolition Ripped.” *New Haven Register*, 8 November 1996.

³³ Richard Hegel, quoted in Yen Cheong, “Divinity School Longs to Stay Put.” *Yale Daily News*, 4 April 1996.

vation is for slowing things down, slowing demolition down, slowing rebuilding down, until we reach again some unified cultural sense of ourselves in time. And it is the purpose of historic preservation to maintain what little connection remains.

The truth of this is observed from many different angles of preservation. It is the neo-Marxist Tafuri who noted that the “continual destruction of the present contributes to the nihilism of our times.”³⁴ And it was the romanticizing John Ruskin who put sharply our architectural duty to the dead and the unborn:

I must not leave the truth unstated, that it is again no question of expediency or feeling whether we shall preserve the buildings of past times or not. We have no right whatever to touch them. They are not ours. They belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us. The dead have still their right in them: that which they labored for, the praise of achievement or the expression of religious feeling, or whatsoever else it might be which in those buildings they intended to be permanent, we have no right to obliterate. What we have ourselves built, we are at liberty to throw down; but what other men gave their strength, and wealth, and life to accomplish, their right over does not pass away with their death; still less is the right to the use of what they have left vested in us only. It belongs to all their successors.³⁵

Indeed, something of the same insight was contained in the words Yale President Levin used when he announced that the divinity school would not move from the Sterling Quadrangle. Paraphrasing William Lyon Phelps, Levin declared, “[l]ong after our bones are dust, long after we have left this planet, these gracious and lovely buildings will continue to cast their charms.”³⁶

But perhaps the finest expression of the purpose of preservation—and in a uniquely American moment—comes with Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address. Its purpose was to dedicate a Civil War graveyard where the remains of Northern soldiers were buried.

³⁴ Tafuri, “There is No Criticism. Only History,” 97.

³⁵ Ruskin, *Seven Lamps of Architecture*, 186.

³⁶ Richard C. Levin, quoted in *Save the Quad, The Case for Renovating the Quad*, 29 August 1996, 1.

but, as J. B. Jackson notes, it can be read as a beautiful description of what a historic monument means and how we should respond to it in our thoughts and actions:³⁷

We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as the final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. . . . It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us.³⁸

With these words, Lincoln indicates why we build monuments: at a specific moment, we make a contract—a covenant—and the monument exists as a reminder of that contract. It is a binding of the future just much as it is a marking of the past: by promising immortality to the dead, it promises that we will teach children yet unborn to teach their own children to remember.

³⁷ See Jackson, *Necessity for Ruins*, 93.

³⁸ Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," quoted in Svend Peterson, *The Gettysburg Addresses: The Story of Two Orations* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing, 1963), 48-51.

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